

Young Adult Dystopian Fiction in the Postnatural Age

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Abstract

This thesis investigates, from an ecocritical-postnatural perspective, how Australian young adult dystopian fiction interacts with the idea of co-existence and interconnectedness, as well as the narrative potential that this offers. In realising this aim, the thesis engages critically with fourth-wave ecocriticism through its focus on postnaturalism. It argues that a postnatural perspective offers readers and writers ways of thinking about how all parts of an ecosystem are interconnected, with no element solely responsible for ecological crises.

The thesis comprises a novel entitled *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys* and an exegesis that provides the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of both components. A critical analysis of three exemplar focus texts – *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (2012) by Ambelin Kwaymullina, *Days Like This* (2011) by Alison Stewart, and *The Big Dry* (2013) by Tony Davis – supported the development of the creative work in conjunction with the theoretical framework. The thesis considers the value of a counternarrative to map periods of resistance where a protagonist uses the language of the dystopian society to challenge dominant ideologies. It also examines and utilises living discourse (Bakhtin, 1989) to demonstrate how shifts in the use of specific terms can create an opportunity for revised and flexible meanings.

When the Cloud Hit the Kellys depicts a dystopian world where Peace Kelly leaves her city to search for Seb/Star in the Surrounds. Through the counternarrative, Peace begins to interact with people outside of the dystopian society, which changes the way she understands the dominant language and assists in her development of a postnatural subjectivity. Through the exegesis and novel, I demonstrate how a postnatural reading maps the development of the protagonist towards viewing the elements of their ecosystem as interconnected and co-existing.

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Nature, postnatural, young adult dystopian fiction, dystopia, counternarrative, living discourse, ecology

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Of all people, I want to particularly thank my grandfather. So much of this thesis is due to his influence as I was growing up. Not only did he always encourage me to look at everything I read with a critical eye, but he gave me the respect for the environment that spurred on the interest that led to this thesis. Whether it was spending time together in the garden or hiking in rainforests, my grandfather always engaged me in the type of dialogue that made me realise that I was only a small part of a very large and delicate ecosystem. I thank him for the achievements that I have already made, as well as the new challenges that this thesis will enable me to take on in the future.

Statement of Original Authorship

The work in this thesis is an original contribution to the field that has not been submitted for consideration at any other institutions of higher education. All works and concepts authored by other people are referenced in the text, and no part of this thesis has been previously submitted for publication.

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Part 1: The Novel¹

When the Cloud

Hit the Kellys

B. Richardson

¹ This novel was highly commended in the 2016 Viva La Novella competition by Seizure.

Bubbling

Sebastian Kelly, born Stargazer Kelly, opened his eyes to bright lights. In front of him there was a white tiled wall with green mosaic leaves at intervals. When Sebastian looked down, he saw that his clothes were soaked in blood. There was a mess of events in his mind, and while some of them he reckoned for nightmares, at least a few of them must have been real. The red skin that his clothes had become was evidence enough to accept that. Some of the blood looked fresher than the rest. His arms were pinned tightly behind him and bound to his chair. He felt his body attempt to wrench free even though he knew that he couldn't. He couldn't see The Creep, but he could hear him shuffling about in the background. Seb could hear another sound too: bubbling.

His whole body itched and prickled. The left side of his head ached. Memories of pointed yellow petals. Not just any petals, he reminded himself. Oleander. Keep specific. Don't lose details. Any little thing might end up counting. Give some sort of advantage. Provide some narrow exit out of that place. There was one thing was for sure though: this wasn't The Creep's first rodeo. A few other memories started to pour in, but there was no telling which of them he'd created for himself in periods of unconsciousness.

The faces from the newspapers across the years crept in. The pudgy, old men who had been business-as-usual one day and then vanished like an icecap in the Arctic. When their bodies came back they were always unrecognizable. Each of them for a different reason. Special treatment. Tailored, like a good suit. The more that Sebastian came to, the worse the itching got.

What else was he sure about? Driving by himself in the Surrounds. Idiot. No time for self-pity. What about after driving? There was driving and then there was stopping. The Creep in the road. The Creep hadn't had his mask on, but Seb's memory had blurred the face the more that he tried to recall it. All he had now was an approximation, like abstract art. These ambiguous, overlapping splotches. There had been a fire in the shrubs to the side of the road. Seb hadn't thought about it at the time. Offered help. Then there was being clubbed. Then there was being dragged over to the smoke. Seb wondered for a moment if he had been burned, but decided that the itching would be much worse if that were the case. The more that he thought about that day, the longer it seemed that he had been there in the room. How many times had he woken up in the chair now? It could be the first time or the tenth. It seemed familiar though. He couldn't have dreamt something this specific.

It was then that he realized that the dull ache in his jaw wasn't because of some injury. There was something in his mouth that was keeping it from closing. Seb's parched tongue swelled around the intruder: a hollow cylinder. He tried to swallow, and the plastic pressed into the papery skin at the back of his throat. He coughed. The wooden legs of his chair scraped as Seb was turned around.

He still couldn't see The Creep, but he felt a hand on his shoulder. Seb's brain struggled as he registered the kitchenette. Details, details, details. There was a pot on the stove. Dull orange with a brown handle and a matching lid. There were some mushrooms sliced neatly on a chopping board, along with various roots and leaves. The ingredients were arranged as a grid, each type with its own square and wide berths between. Sebastian scanned the ingredients, but it was difficult to tell when they were chopped so finely. Anyway, plants had never really been his forte. He'd left that to Phil and the others. More than a few regrets now.

Beside the chopping board, there was a single, dainty teacup set on its saucer. Next to that sat a hessian sack with a small lump in the centre. Seb saw a shiver run through the sack. The tube in his mouth was pushed so far down that it was hard to breathe through his nose. Breathing through the tube was worse though, as the air clawed at his dry throat.

The Creep stepped into view and waved. He had his mask on: the canvas bag draped over his head. Drawstring tight around the base of his neck. It was a tote bag that had gotten popular in the Flagship. One of the more recent fads. Seb had been given one at a conference and had it in the back of his car for Peace. The same one likely. *10 ratings a day keeps the climate away*, the tote proclaimed cheerfully under the rating smiley. But the tote was upside down and had gone through some modifications. The straps cut off. Holes snipped in the eyes. Normally Seb wouldn't have been sentimental about a change like that, but the alterations make him sick.

Sebastian watched as The Creep moved over to the stove, lifted the lid, and placed it on the bench. The Creep picked up the knife next to the chopping board, and he started sliding each segment of ingredients into the pot. Some went in later than others. He stood waiting for a few minutes, doing broad sweeps with his watch arm. Every now and then he fished some of the ingredients out of the pot with a sieve and disposed of them. When they were all gone, he reached to the side, picked up the sack, and brought it over to Sebastian at eye-level.

The Creep put his hand in the sack and let it fall to the floor. The unfortunate creature that was left on The Creep's palm looked across at Sebastian. Its gold-flecked eyes shone beneath a horned, autumn-coloured brow. It was a large one, with rolls of fat bunching around its downturned mouth and swallowing its front legs. It certainly didn't look like it had been

scrounging for meals out in the Surrounds. More likely growing nice and fat in a tank somewhere. Getting ready for the big day.

The toad jolted forward, but The Creep closed his fist around its beefy back legs. Seb heard the crunching of bones. White beads began to decorate the glands on either side of the toad's head as it struggled. The Creep strode over to the pot. Plop. Not so long this time. The body was retrieved with the sieve and cast away with the other matter. He dipped the teacup into the pot.

The Creep dragged another chair over to sit in front of Sebastian. He brought over a side table too, and set the teacup and saucer on it. He sat there staring at Seb from the frayed eye-holes of the upside-down smiley face, his arms draped over the back of his chair with one leg resting on the other at a right angle. Every now and then he'd turn to watch the steam curling up out of the teacup. When the steam had become a subdued sort of mist hovering at the cup's rim, he sat upright and undid the drawstring around his neck. Even after all of his attempts to remember that face, Seb closed his eyes, gave himself a moment, and then opened them again.

Sebastian guessed that they were the same age, or close enough to it. The Creep's ragged, black hair went down to his shoulders and looked like its maintenance involved taking scissors to it in a frenzy. He was wearing newish jeans with steel-capped boots and a white singlet. In his mind, Seb had constructed The Creep's eyes as shark-like, with large, black pupils. Upon inspection, they weren't so different from his own: warm, brown, and looking like they had stories to tell. He smiled, and Seb was totally disarmed by how normal The Creep looked. He had the sort of cheeky grin that ensured a good bit of banter. The kind of person that Seb would have bought a couple of drinks if given the chance, in his insatiable search for tales of growing

up on the outside. The kind of person that he would have run around with for a couple of days breaking every Flagship Tech rule in the book as they explored mangroves and climbed mountains before he'd go back to the Flagship and have the Director write off his most recent bout of transgressions as *boys will be boys*. But for the fact that The Creep was sitting there blowing at whatever concoction he'd prepared in the teacup, he could have been any of the young adventure types that had shown Seb so much more than he could learn behind his desk in the confines of the Flagship. But that's the thing about psychos isn't it, Seb found himself thinking: they don't all look like their house is lined with freezers containing body parts. The Creep placed the teacup back on the table and then proceeded to rhythmically shake his wristwatch as if he was catching up for the lost time.

The Creep didn't descend from anybody in a Flagship, that much was clear. His skin and facial structure bore the hallmarks of the Forgotten People. Sebastian had met a few on his travels outside of the Flagship, but they were becoming the stuff of legends. You could no longer trace their features to any particular region of the world before the PNR. Those locked out of the Flagships had come together in an attempt to have some fortitude. Over generations, the floods and the fires and the storms made the gene pool smaller and smaller, until the Forgotten People had begun to take on their own characteristics. Whispers of old countries and cultures. Of everything left behind. They hadn't told Seb any of that in school, of course. That chapter of history had been one of his more recent acquisitions, when he'd had chances to explore the Surrounds and spent nights in bars and on stoops talking to anybody who had the patience for his questions. It made sense to Seb that the Flagship wouldn't tell the school kids though. Some things were better to learn when your thoughts on the world were more fixed.

Seb snapped out of it. His thoughts used to be so crystalline. Now they wandered all over the place like those of a rambling old man. He focussed on The Creep again. He wanted to remember as many details as he could while he had the chance. When he looked at The Creep's neck, there was a long and jagged scar that ran down along the front of his throat. The mangled tissue had been cut with nothing like the medical precision of an operation. An attempt by somebody to kill him maybe. Or an attempt that he'd made himself.

The Creep reached into his pocket and pulled out Sebastian's phone. He sure knew his way around it. Seb hadn't kept Director Jenkins under any recognizable contact name, but that didn't seem to have made any difference. There was a whole bank of messages that The Creep had sent, but none of them had received a reply. The Creep held up the phone so that Sebastian could read them all. The messages started about two weeks before. They began simply enough. Making contact. No demands. After a couple of days, the photos started. Looking at the images made Sebastian feel it all afresh. All the bites and stings and wounds where things had burrowed and gnawed. He didn't know if it was in his mind, but there was still a crawling sensation under patches of his skin.

Once The Creep had gone through all of the messages, he went back to the home screen and into the gallery. He went past all of Seb's photos of friends, colleagues, and ex-girlfriends to a photo taken the night before he'd left for uni. The Creep let him take a good long look at it. Poor Peace had been trying to hold back tears the whole night, and her face was flushed. She was smiling, but she had the look of somebody who knew that their whole life was about to change.

The Creep put a boot on Seb's shin and pushed him back. There was a clunk as he landed halfway to the ground. Staring at the ceiling now. Extra legs fitted to the back of his chair. Seb

stopped breathing and tried to force his tongue close up against his throat to cut off access. The Creep tipped his pinky and smiled as the teacup tilted over the hollow cylinder in Sebastian's mouth. Down the hatch.

The liquid was bitter and Sebastian couldn't keep his tongue from shooting to the side. He felt the liquid trickle down his throat. The Creep undid a fresh packet of thick gardening gloves and removed the tube. Sebastian hocked out the first few mouthfuls of saliva as it rushed to his desert of a mouth, trying to get rid of as much of the liquid as he could. It wasn't any use.

Very soon Seb's breathing became short and it felt like there was a light pressure on every inch of his skin that slowly intensified and made him feel claustrophobic. There was a clammy sensation all over his body. Hot and cold flushes. Shivers and spasms. He tried to keep his mind empty, but all he could think of was Peace, Peace, Peace.

Tag

Birch Kelly, born Brandon Kelly, opened his eyes to darkness. At 5:59 every morning, he walked to the hall and removed the great offender from the wall. At 6:00 the gong struck, rousing every human and sending all of the other guests scuttling. Once, with a desperate need to pee, Peace very nearly did her business in the hall when she saw her father's stringy figure waiting in the murky morning light. On the first morning of The Cloud, the gong rang out like it was any other day.

Peace groaned as she rolled onto the meditation stool beside her bed. Birch had done a lovely job of it, but no amount of cheery painting is concession enough for leaving a cocoon of bedclothes before you're ready. Her body folded into the familiar zigzag. The door creaked as Birch checked in. He never caught her soft snores.

Peace could hear the breakfast things being laid. She opened her cupboard the same way that you open a refrigerator for the seventh time in an afternoon, hoping that something wondrous will have materialised there. Peace limply dragged her hand through the range of beiges until it caught on a victim and the collar popped off the hanger. She paired it with the jeans slung over her study chair before beating her frizzy, hazard-orange hair into submission.

She walked over to her bedside table and picked up the terrarium that her brother had sent her for her last birthday. At the end of a silver chain was a small glass tube with a cork in the top. Inside that was an assortment of miniature mosses that were happily flourishing in their own little world. She put the terrarium around her neck and walked to her closed bedroom door for

the real morning ritual. She didn't close her eyes or chant any words or think any good thoughts. She just stared at the poster. It wasn't like the others that she saw around the Flagship. Her brother had changed fonts a few times. This one was the first one. This one was hers. This one where the white background had been aged with the sun and taken on a yellow tint. Her sketch of a flying fox was wrapped up in its little wings, hanging upside-down from the top. Words flanked the bat on either side. From the Old World...to the new. And Peace just stood there looking up at it. Tall and quiet and calm.

When she was done, she went over to her windowsill. Peace packed up the mini-solar panel and unplugged her Buddybot. She picked him up in one hand and flicked the switch on the side of his head.

'Morning Echo.'

The boxy, blue pixels on the previously blank screen rearranged themselves to display heavy eyes.

'Already?' A yawn. 'Still forecast for cloudy?'

'There's an understatement.'

She turned him around to the window and he faintly nodded as he booted up for the day. Echo looked over at the enormous tank that had taken up most of Peace's dressing table. Brown shapes of varying sizes were sifting through the dirt as they maintained their burrows. Smaller white ones were scuttling around their mothers.

'I guess it's the big day for the roaches,' Echo said looking over at the tank. 'What are you going to do if they just keel over?'

‘That’d be ok. It’d be better than them dying at the camp. At least this way I can cut them up and have a look at what went wrong.’

‘I can’t wait to see the look on everybody’s faces when they turn up with butterflies and pretty beetles and you’ve got these great hulking roaches.’

‘Well, that’s as long as we can get them feeding on more types of leaves.’

‘Yeah. Don’t forget that we need to get stuck into that thing for Art as well,’ Echo noted.

An encouraging smile appeared and then blinked away, leaving only the two clusters of pixels that represented Echo’s eyes. Peace looked out across the street. Things didn’t look any different yet, but by midday she knew she’d struggle to see the letter box. For Art this semester, they had to do an installation of six pieces that showed change. Lots of the other kids had gotten their fathers to buy expensive chemistry kits for live installations. Big bursts of glittery smoke or enormous bubbles that expanded until teachers took a ballpoint pen to them. Peace, however, had been waiting for the next Cloud to come, and now she had a date with her sketch pad and the bay window in the living room. She figured that one sketch every two hours should show enough of a difference until it went completely dark.

The clunk of laden bowls called from downstairs. A long exhale. Echo hovered onto her shoulder and gave her cheek a nudge.

‘Spark up. It’s only breakfast. Then we can just do our own thing.’

‘Save your batteries, short-circuit. Won’t be any more where that comes from today.’

‘There’s a call coming through.’

‘Star?’

‘The director.’

Echo floated down to perch on the study table, and sat casually kicking his legs. His eyes were exchanged for a loading screen, which produced a haggard Jenkins tightening his tie.

‘Morning, Mr. Jenkins!’

‘Good morning, Peace. How are things?’

‘Looks like I’m going to have a much better day than you.’

‘No doubt about it. I’ve got conference calls up the wazoo. Every time we get one of these bloody Clouds you get Upper Management being swayed by nutjobs about how we need to shut down the factories and all go live in the treetops.’

‘Maybe more of a similar day than I thought,’ Peace said sympathetically.

‘Trust me, I’ve certainly thought about having you on a committee in a few years after the sort of nonsense that you’ve grown up with. But you’re too much like your brother to waste you on the crazies. Actually, it’s Star that I’m calling about.’

‘Sure. What’s up?’

‘I’m just wondering if you’ve gotten any messages from him today?’

‘Forget today. He hasn’t responded to anything for ages.’

Jenkins appeared somewhat relieved.

‘Why’s that? Isn’t he responding to you either?’ Peace asked.

‘I haven’t heard a peep. He does shut down sometimes for a week or so with his Project and everything. Has he got a girlfriend at the moment?’

‘Urgh. Yeah. She’s pretty annoying. She’s always sending photos and messages like she wants to be best friends but they’ve only been together for a couple of months. It’s creepy.’

‘Well, knowing Star, you probably won’t have to worry about her for too much longer. All the same, could you send her contact card through?’

‘I hardly think he would have contacted her if he isn’t responding to me.’

‘Of course. Can’t hurt to check though.’

Echo sent through the account and they heard the series of ascending beeps as Jenkins’ computer received the file.

‘Why do you need to talk to him so badly, anyway?’ Peace asked.

‘There’s somebody in another Flagship that’s doing a Project similar to his who has contacted me about collaborating.’

‘He’s not going to like that.’

‘No, he’s not. I’ll let him know all the same though. A challenger might be good for him. Are you all ready for the summer camp?’

‘It’s the only thing that’s getting me through to be honest.’

‘Have you read those articles that I sent last week?’

‘What I can understand. I want to check up on some stuff with Star.’

‘That’s good. The sooner we can get you into a Project the sooner we can get you out of that little Kelly commune and over here. Ordinarily I might be able to sway a few people but because it’s coming down to public vote you’re going to have to make it on your own steam, Kiddo. You’re just going to have to blow the whole Flagship away. I must say, you could have chosen something a little cuter for those purposes, but I’m sure that you know what you’re doing.’

‘Yeah, Star said as much. But people hate bats and he’s doing just fine.’

‘It’s true, but don’t forget that your brother could sell milk to a dairy farmer. Are you going to do a test run today?’

‘Yeah, and I’ve got a couple of bits and pieces for some subjects at school as well.’

‘Don’t let school work get in the way too much. You’re not going to need any of that other junk if you get into a Project early.’

Jane Jenkins walked in carrying a plate loaded with bacon and eggs, and she set it on the table for her father. Jane looked up at the screen.

‘Oh hey, dummy! Have you got my package yet?’ Jane asked.

‘Not yet.’ Peace said with a smile.

‘Well, it should be there soon. Hope you got me something good! Today is going to be uber freaking boring. Tash told me that—’

‘Well, we’d better go, Peace,’ the director cut in. ‘But do let me know if you hear from Star, won’t you? There’s a good girl.’

The call cut, and Echo’s eyes reappeared as downturned, and he wore a matching pout.

‘At least Star isn’t just ignoring me,’ Peace said.

‘Do you think that anything could have gone wrong in the lab?’

‘Ha ha what? Like one the fruities morphed and developed a taste for blood?’

‘Ha ha. I don’t know. Yeah, that’s ridiculous. Do you think that we should try calling what’s-her-name anyway?’

‘Cecilia,’ Peace choked with her tongue out.

‘Maybe the director’s right? At least we’d know that he’s busy working or something. She’d probably be thrilled enough about us contacting her that she’d hassle Star to get back to you about your questions.’

‘You’re right.’

‘So, do I call her?’ Echo asked.

‘Maybe just send a message. I don’t know if I can handle talking to her right now.’

‘OK, record after the beep.’

‘Hi Cecilia, have you heard from St-Seb lately? Thanks.’

‘That’s it?’

‘Yup.’

‘Wow, the director isn’t wrong. You’ve got to work on your people skills.’

‘Pretty hard to do when all most people want to talk about is how much they tossed into the recycling last month or what meaningless stuff they’re going to replace it all with.’

Peace had barely gotten up from the table when she heard the warning ringtone that she had especially set the month before.

‘Just wait until it rings out. She’ll leave a message,’ Peace said.

Echo turned down his volume as Cecilia called another five times before the message came. Between Cecilia’s hysterical sobs, Peace found out that he’d dumped her, and also that he hadn’t been home at any of the times that she’d visited his apartment during the past couple of weeks, on what Peace gathered to be at least daily visits.

When the message finished, Peace and Echo didn’t speak while they thought for a moment.

‘You got anything?’ asked Peace.

‘Nup. I mean, if he isn’t responding to you or Jenkins, then I just don’t know where the hell he’d be?’

Peace heard a tapping at the window and saw a delivery drone waiting to be let inside. She opened the window and hot air rushed into her room. The drone swooped in quickly and she closed the window again. She placed her hands under the sensor beneath the drone, and its crab-like legs unfolded, letting the package drop into her hands. Jane Jenkins’ fine and flourished handwriting was on the label surrounded by stars and winky faces.

Hey Lame-o. Something to get you through the Cloud.

Echo hovered over.

‘Why does she call you stuff like that?’ Echo asked.

‘I don’t know. It’s just the way that she talks.’

Peace opened up the box. There were a few magazines in there featuring models who looked like they could do with a good feed. Jane had also put in some nail polish, a self-pedicure kit, and a packet of fat-free biscuits. The one thing that initially took Peace’s interest, a small shiny box, ended up being nothing more than a mirror that you could twist into different shapes. Peace took everything out of the box and got Echo to scan the barcodes. Then she put everything back in except for the biscuits and sent it straight down the recycling chute next to her window. Peace heard the box clang as it hit the empty skip at the side of their house. She eyed the biscuits, letting them know that she was considering dumping them too, but in the end she put them on her study table. At least they might be vaguely sweet.

‘You’re fourth on the street after that,’ Echo reported.

‘People are getting in early.’

The drone was still hanging around, waiting for instructions. It didn’t have a face, but the way that it retracted its little claws when it saw that she was empty-handed made it seem disappointed.

‘I always feel bad when I don’t have anything to give them, Echo. Like they are sad little dogs that just want to play fetch.’

Echo looked over at the drone.

‘They pretty much are.’

Peace was about to push the button to return the drone to the depot when she heard more clicking on the window. A new drone was knocking with one of its spindly legs, bobbing up and down with the weight of its load. When Peace opened the window, the drone flew in to join its comrade. They gave a few trills of acknowledgement to each other, like mums catching up in the supermarket. Peace retrieved the next package. It was a large one. The writing was in the director’s sure and steady stokes, almost like it had come out of a printer.

For when you put Jane’s gift down the chute. Stay sane in the madhouse.

Inside there were several gifts already boxed with the addresses of the rest of Peace and Jane’s group of friends. Or, more accurately, Jane’s friends. Peace scrawled some quick notes to them, split the packages between the two drones, and sent them on their way. She watched them happily darting between the houses together until they went their separate ways. Then Peace looked inside for her own gift.

The director had loaded the box with art supplies, a magazine on Project updates, some cheesy space comics, old nature documentaries, chocolate bars, chips, and a few holo-board games that she could play with Echo.

‘Much better,’ Echo said.

Peace laid out all of the things from the director on her desk so that Echo could scan them.

‘This ought to give us a bit of a boost.’

‘Getting there. Number two.’

‘Seriously? I’ll have to get some stuff delivered later.’

Her mother called from downstairs.

‘I wish I could just eat this junk instead of going down to breakfast.’

‘Yeah, but then we would have to listen to a long and boring rant about nutrition.’

‘You’re right.’

Peace stood up and trudged downstairs.

When she walked into the kitchen, Peace was greeted with the same joke as every morning. Birch assumed a face of piety without parallel, made the sign of the cross and turned to her mother, Wattle, saying ‘Peace be with you.’

Wattle, who seemed to find this genuinely hilarious every morning of the year, responded with, ‘And also with you,’ before tittering, giving Birch a wink, and going over to silence the kettle. The whole scene made Peace want to violently hurl into the most accessible bonsai.

Peace had heard of the things that other people got to have for breakfast, and had even sampled some of them at sleepovers. Whenever she was over at Jane Jenkins’ house, the director and his wife would do their best to shovel enough bacon, eggs, and hash browns into her to tide her over until the next visit. Breakfast in the Kelly house was always the same: a thick, greyish porridge of such density that it withstood the advances of any spoon. You needed to stab at the gelatinous mass with a fork until the unrelenting goo yielded a small mouthful. As Peace made her first attempt, mounds of the slush coagulated around the prunes that lurked in the abyss. Scattered over the top of the porridge and the submerged adversaries, there was always a fine powder that seemed innocent enough until you put it into your mouth. Then the demonic little

beads began their work: hoarding all of the liquid around them and lodging themselves firmly in the palate as they dispersed their awful, lingering taste.

Those factors aside, Peace knew that she was lucky to be getting anything that morning. Peace and Stargazer never got presents for Christmas, birthdays, or anything like that. They got presents when good things happened in the world. They shared a vivid memory of the day when a particularly menacing Customer Service Representative went into retirement and they were given bicycles, a heap of books, new sets of pencils and paints, and some toys that they had set their eyes on for months. Peace still had the little stuffed echidna on her bed, even though one of its eyes was dangling and it had a bald patch in its spines.

When bad things happened, like when Clouds came, there was a day of fasting and group meditation until they didn't know up from down. There had seemed to be a lot more of those as the years passed. Peace was hoping that she would be able to get her sketches in while both of her parents were locked away in their heads and thinking that Peace was in the same state. As long as she chanted occasionally, they'd stay comatose for hours.

As Wattle cleared the dishes, Birch cleared his throat. Peace hadn't looked at him properly yet that morning, and she noticed the boyish glint in his eye. Peace tried to think of the last time that he'd looked that sparky, and decided that it had been well before Birch had decided that he was no longer mentally fit for work and retired early. Before he'd taken to 'philosophy sessions' in the shed during the daytime, which seemed to involve a good measure of home brew.

'Non-humans, please vacate the table,' Birch requested.

'Why?'

‘Your father has something very important to announce,’ her mother said. ‘It’s a special day, pumpkin.’

There was a very clear two-tier hierarchy in the house: the living – including humans, cockroaches, flies, ants, plants, and anything else that happened to pass through that day – and then the circuted. Echo only stooped slightly, but Peace caught it. He hovered off to the lounge room.

‘You got plans for the day?’ her father asked, as if she were not housebound by rapidly approaching smoke. Star had been gone for years, but she still found herself waiting for her brother to respond first.

‘Not really.’

‘Good!’

Birch pulled an enormous box out from under the table. Peace looked at it suspiciously. It was wrapped in newspaper.

‘I want you to help us with something. A family project sort of thing.’

‘Like when we rescued the rats from the fumigation next door?’

‘No rats.’

‘Another great heist of mailbox catalogues?’ Peace guessed.

‘That was two or three times, honey,’ her mother cooed. ‘Four at most.’

‘It’s something new.’

‘Are you really going to make me guess?’

‘I’ll give you three questions.’

‘It’s something to do with this Cloud, I guess?’

‘That’s our clever little girl.’

‘We’re going to ward it off with good will?’ Peace said, with her head in her hand.

‘I wish, baby, but not even positivity can get us out of this mess.’

‘Drink some punch?’ she asked, but then eyed her half-empty cup of juice.

‘OK, open it up.’

Peace unwrapped the present to find some large pieces of cardboard, textas, and some glitter glue.

‘...Thanks?’

‘We’re going to make placards! It’s been so long that I can’t even remember the last time.’

‘There’s a good reason why nobody does that anymore,’ Peace replied.

‘We’ve got a plan for the cops.’

‘That’s not what I’m talking about. But tell me, how would the two of you take on the Flagship’s finest?’

‘It won’t just be us, that’s how. Your father reckons that with the size of this Cloud, other people are going to join for sure!’ Wattle said, attacking the remnants of breakfast cemented to the crockery with a scourer. ‘He says that this Cloud is a blessing of sorts. That something this foul unites people, no matter how different they are.’

‘So you’re going to head out there with some signs and hope that enough people join you before the cops do?’

‘We’re not hoping. We know.’

‘No, you’re hoping. It’s not like something’s changed. This Cloud is a bad one, but that doesn’t mean that people are going to start going all loopy. They know that the Clouds are being dealt with.’

‘Spoken like a true VIP,’ her father sighed, the look in his eyes dulling again.

‘Well somebody in this house has to be. That’s the only reason that the two of you haven’t been shuffled out to some satellite city already.’

‘But you don’t earn that money, do you Peace? You take from the director and you give back to the Flagship. It all seems easy now, but wait until you start making your own money. Then we’ll see how you feel about having so much of it wrenched from your hands.’

‘If I were old enough to be making my own money, I would,’ Peace said. ‘Maybe then I wouldn’t have to dress like I’m homeless and eat like a rabbit.’

‘You speak as if we don’t want to be out there with our fellow humans, Peace. Once you get yourself on your feet, that’s where we’ll be,’ said Birch.

‘Don’t use that word like that. You and I are as human as any low-life or drifter that you’d find in the Surrounds. I don’t see how not investing in the future makes somebody more in touch with the world somehow. And don’t pretend that you’re doing this for me. The only reason that you haven’t gone out there already is because you know that you wouldn’t live out the year.’

‘If we’re talking about terms, I’d rather you didn’t abuse the word *invest* like we’re part of something that builds or grows for anything but ourselves. And despite what you feel right now, we’d be out there if we hadn’t had you and Stargazer to think of,’ Birch said.

‘But we are investing for a better future? And you don’t care at all what happens to Star,’ she growled, a headache brewing. ‘You haven’t spoken a word to him since he left.’

‘The door’s always open, Peace, but he never walks through it. Who’d have thought that we would end up with such conformists for offspring, my darling Wattle? I suppose the universe works in mysterious ways. Sooner or later, Peace, I really hope that you’re going to see that there are things in the world worth going against the grain for, instead of becoming a yes-man like your brother did.’

‘You don’t even know what it is that you’re against, Dad. You just like the idea of being against something.’

‘Oh Peace, I was so sure that you’d have grown past all of that by now. Things just aren’t black and white in this world, possum,’ Wattle added.

‘And grey is where it gets interesting!’ Birch said. ‘And where you’ll find that a great deal of the world sits. One day you’ll see that, honey,’ Birch assured her, with a smile that made Peace’s fists curl. ‘I know that you will.’

‘So how exactly do you think that Star has become a mindless drone when he has gotten to found and guide his own Project? Everything that he has dreamed and spoken of since he was ten?’

‘You know how it upsets your mother to talk about that.’ He glanced at her necklace. ‘And we’ve asked you not to wear that atrocity at the family table.’

Peace held onto the terrarium.

‘Why does it upset you so much? Star is doing so well for himself, and you act like he’s dead.’

Tears began to fall down Wattle’s cheeks, but she didn’t wipe at them.

‘It’s tragic enough that we have fallen to living like this, Peace, but why take the few other creatures that are left and pollute them, too? Change them? Control them?’ Wattle said with a faraway look.

‘They’d be completely gone if we didn’t have the Projects.’

‘In your heart, you must know that would be better,’ Wattle managed to sob.

Peace tried to keep her mouth shut, knowing that this conversation would lead to a lecture about how this thing never really means this, and that thing never really means that, and how

perhaps your arm isn't really an arm, and what if Earth isn't really Earth, and what business did you ever have feeling so sure about those things to start with?

'Yes Mum,' she said and saw Echo peeking in from the hallway. He flashed crossed-out eyes atop a lolling tongue and Peace smothered a smirk.

'Oh Peace,' Birch said gently, 'how I would love to be able to talk to you a few years from now.'

Peace's lips pursed a little tighter.

'I know that Director Jenkins is your friend's father...' Birch started.

He waited for Peace to cut him off. She waited for him to finish.

'But you're too young to see him for what he really is. He legally isn't even a person anymore. Doesn't that concern you? He's just a part of the Flagship structure. He's less human than Echo.'

'I thought that we were meant to be aspiring to move away from those kind of labels, weren't we Dad? Traverse the grey? And let up on Echo. It's not fair.'

'You do know that Echo doesn't have a personality, don't you? He might be very good at tailoring and learning, but at the end of the day, it's just programming. Just another type of control. He's just a lump of wires and sparks made to mimic and keep track of your purchases and movements. And as for *that* man...'

'What exactly are you protesting against, anyway?' Peace asked, diverting the conversation a little to keep herself from an all-out argument.

‘I’m sick and tired of hearing how they’ve got some mumbo jumbo Project proving this or that about how we’re living cleaner than ever and all of that rot. I’ve been doing my own research, you know, Peace?’ Birch said, taking a roughly folded piece of paper out of his pocket and brandishing it in her face. ‘And I’ll tell you, the severity of those Clouds isn’t getting any better. Even if you take this one out of the mix.’

She grabbed the piece of paper to stop it from flicking against her face.

‘And how have you determined that?’

‘No one way of course. That would be as narrow as any of those bogus science experiments,’ he said, flailing his arms in the air. ‘If anybody else has been taking as much notice as me of the little things over the last few years, they’ll have seen it too. The veggies in our patch. The amount of birds in the sky.’

She looked at the piece of paper. It was a jumble of smudged numbers and lines.

‘So you’ve graphed how many birds have been flying past every day for the last five years, have you Dad?’

‘You’re missing the point. The exact facts don’t matter. It’s the effects that need to be considered here. It just doesn’t make sense to have our communities blighted by these monsters if we’re living as clean as they say, does it? Even your beloved logic can’t dispute that.’

‘That’s not how it works, Dad. If we are living that clean now, and there’s no reason to think that we aren’t, the Clouds are going to keep rolling on in because of everything that happened before the PNR. Living clean now might lessen the fires down south in the future, but sustainable living now doesn’t mean that—’

‘All that talk about the Point of No Return is just propaganda, Peace.’

Peace slammed her hands down on the table.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ she said.

‘We can still save this world. While there are things clinging to life on this big rock of ours, we’ve still got a chance. If Upper Management stop looking for ways to line their pockets,’ her father responded.

‘Even if we did still have carbon-intensive lifestyles, what sense would that make? Think about it. The cost of the health issues from the Clouds. The difficulties with farming. What possible reason would they have to keep all of that going?’

‘Money.’

‘I just explained how it’s not that. They would make far less than the cost of the effects.’

‘From the people’s money, not their money.’

Peace’s nails were burrowing so deeply into her palms that she thought the skin might give way.

‘I’m not pretending it isn’t about money, I just don’t think that it’s going into anybody’s back pocket. There’s a host of research Projects just for SEQ03 alone. And that’s before you start on the rural operations and—’

‘Please. None of that at the breakfast table,’ Birch said firmly.

‘What? The truth?’

‘One day, Peace, you’ll see that people aren’t always true to their word. Particularly men—or whatever he is—like John Jenkins,’ Wattle said, spitting his name out like rotten fruit.

‘I just don’t think that anybody is gaining anything from polluting a broken world. And why would Mr. Jenkins spend so much of his time promoting the Projects otherwise? I do think that our time is ending. And I do think that the money that people spend gets funnelled into research. And I do think that the Projects are going to give society the best chance we have to see out the century.’

‘This century? Peace, the Earth is far grander than that. Despair isn’t good for the soul, my darling girl. I know that things seem dire, but there is rarely a definite end to anything in this life, Peace.’

‘Death?’

‘And even then, our bodies get returned to our dear Mother Nature to—’

‘You know what I think? You can’t handle what is happening ahead so you look back instead of forward. It’s not about trying to preserve the way that things were. It’s about trying to find a way that things can be now,’ Peace said with her palms flat on the table.

‘So surviving means having no regard for our world? Throwing out and buying a new wardrobe every time the season turns? Barely ever making your own food, let alone growing it? This endless buying of gifts and things that you don’t need and that don’t last so that you can keep up a good customer loyalty rating?’ Birch persisted.

Peace felt like her parents’ voices were blending in her head.

‘I’m tired of this conversation,’ Peace said.

‘That’s what you always say when you run out of facts. That’s why ideologies are bound to win. It’s the big ideas that keep momentum.’

‘No, that’s what I say when there’s no point in talking anymore because you just make things so abstract that you don’t have a point. It’s the big ideas that get so broad that you aren’t actually saying anything by the end of it,’ Peace said through gritted teeth.

‘Oh, honey,’ Wattle said, putting her head in her hands.

‘The world’s problems don’t get solved because someone has raggedy old clothes and a garden patch. And you know what? Yes. If this is the kind of society that we need to be able to fund the research that we can’t live without, one where we buy crap all the time that we don’t need so that we can fund something that we do, then I’m firmly on its side,’ Peace said, digging at the table with her thumbnail.

‘If people really think that we need the research that much, why wouldn’t they just fund it themselves? Why does it need to be forced from them?’ her mother asked.

‘I don’t know?! People are selfish and phony and love to get caught up in meaningless fads. And it’s hardly forced.’

‘You said it yourself. We don’t buy enough. We don’t rate enough. If it wasn’t for you being a VIP, then we would be cast out,’ Wattle said.

‘Well, most people don’t find it that hard to do a few product ratings a day. They’d be buying that stuff anyway.’

‘Would they really be spending as much as they do, though? Trying to boost their profiles and get their kids into good schools? No. People don’t buy these things to fund research, Peace. They buy them because they are frightened, and—’

Peace pushed away from the table and lost the end of her mother’s sentence as she scraped her chair against the floorboards.

‘There’s no need to get so upset, Peace. We’re just having a conversation.’ Birch said soothingly.

‘I’m sorry, but if you really think that making your own bread and never turning the air-con on is going to make tigers start springing back up in forests then there really is no helping you.’

She thumped upstairs and collapsed on her bed. Echo floated over.

‘Hey, you.’

‘Switch off, Echo. I’m not in the mood.’

‘I’ve got something that’ll make it better.’

‘What?’ Peace snapped, her face buried in the pillow.

‘Oh...just a little message.’

Peace looked up.

‘He finally got back to us? What does it say?!’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t want to look until you got here.’

She grabbed Echo and hugged him tightly. Then she put him in her lap and held the sides of his head. The message flashed up.

‘No video?’ Peace asked.

‘Nope.’

‘Retro.’

SEQ10. Tag. You’re it.

‘That’s all? He can’t be serious?’

‘He’s found a way out?’

‘Why would he want to go out there into the Surrounds? Maybe he’s out on a prac?’

‘I feel like he would have said something about that. And he’s never done that before. I don’t think that anybody has done that before.’

‘Maybe they don’t tell us? Secrets of the trade sort of thing?’

‘Between him and the director, I feel like we would know about that.’

‘Maybe they were just waiting until we got a bit older? Imagine that huh? Going outside...’

‘I can’t believe that Star wants us to follow.’

‘We can’t follow...can we?’ Echo asked.

‘Not in a Cloud.’

‘Obviously he means during the Cloud right? It’s not like he wouldn’t know that it’s coming.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Maybe it’s not as bad as we think? Otherwise he wouldn’t suggest it?’

‘Should we contact Mr. Jenkins?’

They looked at each other for a few moments. Then both said,

‘Nope.’

They started zipping around the room and making a pile of items on her bedspread. Peace tiptoed as delicately as she could. Sometimes she found herself just moving for the sake of it because standing in one spot was just too hard. Her hands were shaking. She packed all of the junk food that the director had sent with the drone.

‘We should stop at Mr. Fredricks’ place and get a mask just in case. And maybe some goggles,’ Echo suggested.

‘Good idea. I haven’t been this excited in months!’

‘Neither have I!’

Peace emptied out her money onto her bed and started counting. Echo zoomed around, grabbing her backpack and his solar panel.

‘\$62.50.’

‘Shame. Should we bring some stuff for trading? You know...for the people out there?’

They both stopped.

‘Star wouldn’t tell us to come if it wasn’t safe.’

‘But what about all of the things that they say at school?’

‘Maybe Star will be just outside waiting for us?’

‘Not if he’s in SEQ10.’

‘We should definitely bring stuff to trade. And maybe get one of those knives at Mr. Fredricks’ place.’

‘Yeah, just in case.’

They ransacked her cupboards and desk. It was a meagre pile, but it would have to do. Some old picture books from when she was a kid, left over school stationery, and all of the tacky but pricey jewellery that Jane Jenkins insisted on giving her all of the time.

‘Ok, jump in the bag. I don’t want you getting stuff from the Cloud in your joints, or it’ll take forever to clean.’

He got in and she zipped the bag shut.

‘I’ve just had a thought.’

‘Mmmm?’

‘Maybe we could take Sunseeker?’

Peace shot a quizzical look at the bag. Unzipped it again.

‘What makes you say that?’

‘I don’t want to be dramatic or anything, but what if he’s run away? And we’re running away too? And we just don’t know it?’

‘We’re not running away, Echo, that’s crazy. Mr. Jenkins would kill me. We’ll be back before this Cloud is over. Everybody says that it looks like it will be a long one. We’ll make up some nonsense about running over to Jane’s house and Birch and Wattle will be none the wiser.’

‘And Sun?’

‘She got downloaded, Echo. She’s blank.’

‘She’d still turn on if we charged her up.’

‘But she wouldn’t remember anything. And she’d have no chip, so she wouldn’t grow with us, either. It’d be like when Grandma was alive and couldn’t remember who we were, or that she’d just had a cup of tea.’

‘Wouldn’t Wattle and Birch have chips?’

‘They must. In a box somewhere. Nothing that I could get at easily.’

‘I just don’t feel right about leaving her. Not saying that we are leaving. Just in case.’

Peace was about to point out that Sunseeker was just bits of plastic and wires now, but then she thought of Birch.

‘You know what? She’s not big. It can’t hurt to take her.’

They crept into Star's old room. Peace tried not to look around too much. She'd get caught up on the little things if she did that. She went to the cupboard and pulled down the shoe-box that was packed away at the top.

'I haven't got room for the box, Echo. Are you OK if she's in there with you?'

'I was thinking that I might give her a bit of my power anyway.'

'Not too much. I don't know when we'll see the sun again.'

Peace opened the box slowly. She wasn't there when Star powered Sunseeker down for the last time. It was like a pet dying. Looking at her all still made Peace very uncomfortable. Sunseeker had a thick layer of dust on her screen. Funny, Peace thought, that she would still think of Sunseeker as a girl when the bot was blank. Peace reached over and drew a smiley face in the dust on the display with her finger, but that seemed in poor taste. She reached over again to wipe the whole screen clean and slide Sunseeker's lifeless body into her backpack.

Peace picked up the outdoor container that she had prepared with some soil and caught a couple of the more robust-looking roaches from the main tank. She decided that this wasn't the time to try them on new food, what with testing the air and temperature and all, and put some crispy eucalyptus leaves in the top.

'You ready, Echo?'

'Yup. All good to go in here.'

Peace shut the bedroom door and looked at the poster. She was surprised when it didn't call for her to take it. Instead, it filled her with resolve. She moved to the window and cracked it open. The heat made her recoil and the dry air began feasting on every inch of her skin. Even

though things only looked slightly hazy across the street, there was already an intense smell of burning rubber. Peace's bedroom was up on the second storey, so she would need to climb down onto the living room awning. She secured her roach experiment in the window box and found herself feeling sorry for the little things as they began madly burrowing, realising that somewhere in her mind she was wondering if she and Echo would be coming back as well.

You're it, she reminded herself, and stepped out.

Lists

He stared at the sky. About five hours, he reckoned. The sunlight was still coming through enough to glint against the dome. A sudden rush of gratitude that he'd never tried to bust it open on one of his bad days. He wondered what the dome would look like when the Cloud was in full swing. Like being on the inside of a giant snow-globe, perhaps.

As he was walking along, he found a shoot poking out a little too far on a geranium. He clipped it between his thumbnail and forefinger. He'd attended dutifully to the hedges and flowerbeds. Broken window syndrome and all that. He'd remembered how to take care of their own backyard from afternoons with his father, and from there it had kind of bled. Flick, flick, flick went his watch. It was the lists that had done it. Stuck on fridges and left on kitchen benches. Small objectives. Things to focus on. His mother had always said that a busy brain was a happy one. That was how it started. The watering and the weeding. Then the lawns and the pruning. And before he knew it, his days were full. He had no delusions, but sometimes he imagined them all returning. Their faces when they saw their lawns and their manicured shrubs in the various bizarre forms that they'd chosen. He'd done no reshaping. That didn't seem right.

He'd had to break the window of the first department store early on, deciding that keeping the broken windows to broken windows was all right. A thing of necessity. Survival. He walked into one of the stores now and made his selection. Left his dirty clothes in the back room with the others. Sometimes he thought that washing them would be good for routine, but it just seemed like a waste of water when there was so much clothing left and only him to wear it.

The Show

Sebastian came to. A heavy sense of regret. He tried to remember what he'd said, but his thoughts and things that had really happened were still so caught up in each other.

He'd been moved. There was a drip in his arm. A tube ran along the back of his hand and was taped down on his forearm. He tried to move and found that he couldn't even lift a finger. When he strained his eyes he could see a bag hanging down from a stand next to him. A timer. The liquid in the pouch was the same sickly yellow as the mixture that had been in the teacup. 20.

The window was a large one. It filled his vision. The glass was a hazy grey. Tinted, most likely. A gatehouse? Maybe. Looking through it, Sebastian saw that the building that he was in backed onto a forest. He didn't pick it for a plantation. It was a forest that had been left alone. He tried remembering lectures about remaining conservation areas, but it was like everything that he knew was in some extravagant ballet of the mind, twirling and weaving away from him. 15.

His eyes kept trying to adjust to the fluorescent light. He looked around for his phone. For anything. Then he saw them on the walls. From the Old World to the new. Plastered carefully. Over and over and over again so that they went as far as he could see, all of Peace's bats hanging together in a great colony. Then, he saw something written beneath the window. Blurry at first. Neatly printed. Almost like a plaque. A little box drawn around it as if the words might have tried their luck at escape. 10.

Enjoy the show. 5. 4. 3. 2. 1. A shot of the yellow fluid raced along the tube.

Odds N Ends

Even this early in the morning, the bricks and metal felt hot as Peace clung to them. She wasn't very experienced at sneaking out, and was sure that Birch and Wattle were going to notice. She put down her feet as lightly as she could on the awning, but it still groaned under her weight. Peace crept to the side and used one of the more sturdy trees in Birch's garden to support herself as she made it down to the grass. She ducked under the window for a while, until she realised that she would be in full view of the neighbours.

As casually as possible, she scuttled under the window to the edge of the house and walked along the path of stones that lay between her and her bicycle. She wished that she'd brought another shirt to wrap around her face, but didn't like her chances of climbing back up the side of the house without making a racket. She wondered how long it would be before Birch and Wattle realised that she was gone. A while perhaps. They always did like giving her space of her own.

She went on the bike trail that ran down the back of her house, not wanting any dogooders to go spoiling her plans before they'd even started. Things still sort of looked like they would on any normal ride to school. Nothing particularly noticeable. Probably something that she wouldn't even think about if she hadn't known that a Cloud was coming, only when she looked into the distance it was kind of hazy like it might rain.

Mr. Fredricks' corner store wasn't far. She and Stargazer had often done neighbourhood chores when they were children to score some loose change so they could go down and buy ice-

cream and lollies and potato chips. They'd have to buy water too, so that they could wash their mouths out afterwards as the lecture from Wattle and Birch wouldn't have been worth it. Peace remembered many occasions sitting on the pavement outside running her tongue over her teeth for remnants before baring them and getting Star to see if she'd missed anything. Sometimes Mr. Fredricks would give them the water for free and say it was a real shame that their parents were such whackos. Other times he'd tell them not to loiter on the pavement like a couple of criminals.

Halfway to the store, a chunk of debris flew into her eye. Peace had to stop for a moment to let it flush out. She felt a tear dribbling down her cheek, getting caught on the dirt that had already caked itself to her face. She had to remind herself that it was just a reaction. Something that the body did. Like breathing. But, as it is with yawning, she felt a tear go down the other side too. She focused on her feet pressing down on the pedals and that made it better. She mightn't have been able to see too much of the Cloud yet, but there was already a tightness in her chest that made her wonder whether she had better get more than a flimsy little mask from Mr Fredricks' shop.

As she was riding, she heard the sound of Sunseeker powering up from inside her backpack in the handlebar basket.

'Hello?' Peace heard.

'It's me,' Echo answered.

'Who's me?'

'It's Echo.'

'I went to sleep.'

‘You did.’

‘I don’t have a chip.’

‘You don’t.’

‘Why am I here?’

‘I just wanted to say hello.’

‘Hello. I don’t have a chip. You look just like me. Do you have a chip?’

‘I do.’

‘Why don’t I have a chip?’

‘It was taken out.’

‘Can it be put back in?’

‘Maybe.’

‘I don’t have a chip.’

‘Do you have anything in there? Do you remember who I am? Do you remember Star?’

A moment’s pause.

‘I don’t have a chip. Can you have someone call the Flagship for me? I should really have a chip you know.’

‘Sunseeker, that’s your name. We’re going to see Star.’

A moment of silence again.

‘I’m sorry to alarm you, but it seems that I don’t have a chip. Can you help me?’

The trill of descending beeps.

‘I’m sorry Echo,’ Peace said over the bag.

‘It’s OK. That was good for me I think.’

‘How’s that?’

‘I guess there might be something to what your parents say after all.’

‘Don’t start thinking about that Echo. They don’t understand anything about you.’

‘Neither do I.’

Peace made the turnoff and stashed her bike behind a shrub. It occurred to her then that he might not even have the shop open. Only for a moment, though. Mr. Fredricks lived above the shop, and he was famous for never turning down a dollar. Parents who wanted dummies for their screaming kids at 1am. Drunk teenagers after a pie at 4 in the morning. Mr. Fredricks got up for all of them. He did do it begrudgingly, mind you, with a great deal of mumbling and grumbling as he descended the staircase in the same style of pyjamas that he had worn for as long as Peace could remember. The kind that matched his wife’s when she was still alive and had a need for wearing pyjamas. Peace assured herself that he wouldn’t leave anybody standing outside of his door. Even if it was in a Cloud.

When she rounded the corner, she could see the lights on his sign winking away, *Fredricks’ Odds N Ends*, more sparkly than usual as they picked up the light of the dust whirling through the air. It made the whole scene look a lot more magical than it had a right to. When

Peace walked in, Mr. Fredricks was sitting at the counter immersed in a book of crosswords. He looked up briefly, and then went back to his crossword like it was any other day. Peace walked along the corridors of his little shop seeing everything that she'd passed by a thousand times before with new eyes. Suddenly his shop seemed incredibly practical. He had ropes, flints, compasses, torches, and all kinds of other things that you'd need when you were in a fix, although she couldn't think of any time that the clients of *Odds N Ends* would have a need for any of it. At the back of the store, Mr Fredricks had an extensive collection of pocket knives that the neighbourhood boys always stood drooling over. Mr Fredricks would never let any of them buy one, even if they were old enough. He'd look them up and down, and then say 'Not the kind of lad that I see needing one of these for any good reason,' before sniffing deeply to clear his nose. 'Or have I got you figured wrong?' And the boys would stare at their shoes and get a severe case of word salad.

The pocket knives had never really taken Peace's interest, but she was compelled to walk right up to the glass and press her face and hands against it. The knives were \$30. She had a strange sensation about them. She was drawn to one that didn't have a fierce animal on it, or a silly name, or anything like that. It was just a simple grey thing that folded down neatly. She convinced herself that there were a whole bunch of reasons that she might need a knife, and then that she had nothing to lose by asking for one anyway. Worst case scenario, she would just be looked down on like a million other kids in the neighbourhood had been.

She picked up a pair of swimming goggles and the most expensive of the filtering masks. As she was on her way to the counter, she did the math and realised that she'd be a little short if she was able to get the knife. She got ready to sacrifice the goggles.

When she placed her purchases on the counter, Mr. Fredricks looked at her and gave the warmest smile that she'd ever seen him bestow on anybody.

'Planning on a bit of a stroll are we, young Peace? Nice day for it.'

'Just need some things for school.'

'There's a curfew. In case you've managed not to hear somehow. There's a big Cloud on the way. Biggest that we've ever seen. But I'm guessing that you know that already.'

'There is? You know how hopeless my parents are, Mr. Fredricks. Good thing I came by. I was about to head out to school.'

'With goggles and a mask?'

'For science class.'

'Is that so?'

He had a sort of vigour in his eyes, like she'd lit a candle that everyone assumed had had its day. A wick buried deep in wax. The fact that he hadn't yet reached for his phone made her decide to risk it.

'There's actually another thing that I need. For class. A map of the sub-regions.'

'Give me a moment would you? I keep them in the back room. Don't get asked for them that often.'

'Of course.'

As he hobbled off, she wondered whether *back room* was a code for calling the cops and if she should make a run for it. Just as she was about to dump enough cash onto the counter for the goggles and the mask and leg it, he came shuffling back with his map. He had a big travel pack with him as well. He dumped the pack on the counter.

‘This might be a little big for you sweetheart. We don’t usually get people of your size coming in.’

Wife dead five years and he still said we.

‘Pardon me?’

‘It’s all right, you can drop the act. You happened to come to the right place and I’m very glad for it. Might want to work on your poker face in case anybody stops you though.’

He unfolded the map and picked up the pen that he’d been using for the crosswords. The map was hand-drawn, and meticulously outlined and shaded. He leaned in over it, making a couple of rough circles, triangles and squares.

‘The circle is the best place for you to go out right now. Triangles are the satellites. These squares are the areas that we’ve heard are best to avoid at the moment. That’s only to the best of our knowledge though, so use common sense. Don’t get a lot of info coming in so we work with what we can. Just don’t go walking around in the middle of roads or anything like that. Use roadside shrub when you can, d’ya hear? Now, where is it that you’re going? Got an address?’

‘No sir,’ she said, hoping that her face wasn’t displaying the overwhelming feeling that was coursing through her.

‘Really? You’ve always seemed like one of the more sensible ones. I get it though. Sometimes enough is enough. Got to say though, you would have been the last that I saw making a move against Jenkins. Good on you though. That blithering fool has seen better days. Seems like the longer that they are sworn in, the less careful they get about the whole act, doesn’t it?’

Peace felt her lips purse to respond but pushed them down and just nodded.

‘Just you watch out for yourself out there. It’s a big, bad world. We’ve heard of ones your age getting out before. You’ll be fine. What do you know about the satellites so far?’

‘Not much, Sir. Only what they tell us in school.’

He looked up from the map.

‘Then what in God’s name are you doing going out there? You’ve got pluck, I’ll give you that much.’

He started drawing lines from the little triangles to the side of the map where there was white space.

‘To date we know of about twenty in the surrounding regions. Some of them are encampments, and some of them are villages, but they all like to be addressed as cities hear? The first lesson to learn is how touchy these folk get about where they’re from. It might be a heap of rubbish, but it’s their heap of rubbish, and a vast majority of them chose to be there and go through a lot to stay there.’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘And for the love of God, don’t go using the word *Surrounds*.’

‘Why?’

‘People find that term to be a bit on the nose. The implication that anything outside of the Flagship is other.’

‘But it is?’

‘They don’t see it that way. That’s about the quickest way to get yourself in hot water, so avoid that word like your parents’ cooking.’

She laughed and felt her chest relax a little.

‘Back to the map. There’s a couple of satellites further up in SEQ03 near 07 and 08, but that’s a long way out. You’ve got nine in SEQ02, 04 and 10. Three each respectively.’

‘10. That’s where I’m going.’

‘That far? Well, in that case...’

Fredricks got out a red marker and shaded out about half of the sub-region.

‘Don’t be heading in there then,’ he said. ‘The cities are safe enough, but there’s been a lot of activity, shall we say, in this part. Have you got someone out there?’

‘My brother, but I don’t know if he’s picked a place yet,’ she fumbled, their game seeming more foolish than ever and taking her right back to the times she’d been at that counter as an eight-year-old.

‘Really?’ He looked over his glasses. ‘Well that’s interesting isn’t it? Stargazer Kelly flying the coop. If I’d heard it from anybody else, I sure wouldn’t have believed it. He’s a good

kid, your brother. He'll look after you. Well, you two have three options if you're wanting to settle in SEQ10. Boundary, Newtown, or The Ranges.'

'I thought that Boundary was in our sub-region?'

'There's one in every sub-region that we know of. They were the first to set up and they all keep in close contact with each other. They'll look after you, but I wouldn't recommend it. A few years ago maybe. They've gone a little deviant since then. There's been scraps of news here and there that the Boundaries are getting more aggressive.'

'To everyone or to the Flagship? I haven't heard of any attacks.'

'They happen now and then. Usually snuffed out well before the likes of us know anything. It's not enough to just be free anymore when you've got these Clouds and God knows whatever else happening out there. There isn't any place on this damn planet to be free of that anymore. So the Boundaries want to wash away all of the Flagships and the factories and plantations and everything with them. And even if you've turned around that much young lady, don't forget that when the Boundaries bite there'll be a hell of a lot of backlash. It's happened before. When the Flagship takes an interest, whole cities just go dark overnight.'

'What about Newtown?'

'There'd be a chance of you getting adopted there. People there are still trying to maintain a civilized sort of life, but a simple one. They've got a lot of doctors and scientists. Try to keep some standards. If you couldn't find a family, you and your brother would definitely be able to find work and look after yourselves.'

'What are the people like?'

‘Pretty painful, honestly. If they had the means to make trumpets it would be like the heralding of the apocalypse. You’d have a comfortable life though.’

‘Can you see it lasting?’

‘It’s lasted up until now. A lot of people thought that it wouldn’t. That anything that neutral can’t. They’ve only made it because of help on the inside here. For all of their snobbery, they’re still tied to the system for now.’

‘And The Ranges?’

‘That would be my pick, but I’m on the other side of sixty. It’s a lot of smaller camps. They mostly keep to themselves but help each other out for basics. Live off the land as best they can. What’s left of it anyway.’

‘So there’re no schools in The Ranges? No medicine?’

‘No, but a life like that gives you a lot of other gifts that we’ve forgotten about over time.’

‘How long do people last?’

‘It’s not the best option for longevity, particularly now with the Clouds as they are, but I’d take quality over quantity any day.’

‘Not exactly spoilt for choice am I?’

‘Consider yourself lucky that you have choices. Plenty of travellers before you had a lot less than that. Wasn’t all that long ago that it was only drifters out there, and you just had to live as best you could in the dirt.’

‘How far apart are the cities?’

‘Not that far if you’re meaning to go all the way out to SEQ10 in the first place.’

Her eyes rested on the pack.

‘Just a few things to get you there. A torch and some food and a few bits and pieces.’

Peace reached into her bag and Echo handed up her purse.

‘What does it come to?’

‘Why do you think I charge so much for everything else, hey lass?’

‘Huh?’

‘My gift to you. Paid for by the severely inflated purchases of your fellow citizens. You and your brother alone racked up enough for a few kits just on all that junk you used to gorge on.’

He fished around in his drawer and brought out a stack of barcodes bound with a rubber band.

‘Get that robot of yours out here for a moment.’

Peace unzipped her pack, and Echo popped his head out.

‘Scan these for her would you? You’re still close enough to home that they won’t be looking at the location. Even if you don’t mean to come back, it can never hurt to cover today and a buffer for tomorrow. Just in case you need to turn back and wait for the next Cloud.’

‘Thank you Mr. Fredricks,’ Peace said as Echo began scanning the barcodes. She filled in the customer ratings on his screen, being thanked every time she pressed the smile. Even though

it was always something that she had joked about, in that moment, the gradients of the scale really did seem bizarre. Sad, ambiguous, happy. Not that she'd ever pressed anything but happy, or heard of anybody else doing so. One time she had nearly pressed ambiguous for fun, but had chickened out at the last second.

'How long have you been doing this?'

'Couldn't say. A while. Long before Elsie went.'

'Mr. Fredricks?'

'Yes?'

'There's one more thing that I want to ask about before I go.'

'I saw you looking at them when you came in.'

'So I guess that's a no?'

'Not necessarily. But I want you to tell me why you think it'd help.'

'Well, it doesn't exactly sound the safest out there.'

'And something like that would only increase the danger that you could put yourself in.'

'It wouldn't be like the reason that everybody else wants it. I wouldn't want to scare anybody or anything like that,' Peace explained.

'So tell me, if someone does mean to hurt you, how is a thing like that going to turn the tables?'

'I guess it's not.'

‘Mmmm. It’s not. So which one?’

‘What?’

‘There’s a knife in the pack, but if you have your heart set on another one then we may as well switch it out.’

He unzipped the pack and it was right on top. He took the knife out of its leather sheath. It wasn’t sleek or shiny like the ones in the cabinet, but larger and more solid, with a jagged blade halfway down. The handle was a dark, finished wood with rings of lighter tones.

‘The smart thing to do is run. Hide. Don’t go thinking that this makes you stronger. That’s how people end up rotting in the undergrowth barely a few metres out of the Flagship. Hopefully the only time you need it is cutting sandwiches once you get settled down somewhere. Whittling maybe. Wouldn’t that be nice?’

‘They have sandwiches?’

He thought for a moment.

‘To tell you the truth, I don’t know.’

Peace looked at the knife for a moment.

‘I think I’d like to keep that one.’

‘I thought as much.’

Mr. Fredricks put the knife back in the sheath and zipped up the pack. She pulled it off the counter and buckled with the weight.

‘We can take some out perhaps?’

‘I’ll be OK.’

Peace slung the pack on and found her balance.

‘You’d best get going now. Keep along that bike trail until the end. You shouldn’t come across anyone. Have you been all the way to the end before?’

‘Yeah, a couple of times. The park?’

‘Yes. There’re some big drains down that way. Most of them would probably lead out, but not necessarily to places that you want to go. There’s one that’s under a slope to the left of the field. Beside a power box. There’s a blue splotch on the side of the box.’

‘And I just keep going? No one will be around?’

‘You could have all of Upper Management gathered around that pipe and they’d likely let you out. It’s getting back in again that causes the issue. Once you’re out there on your own, you’re out there. Are you sure that you’re ready for that?’

Peace thought for a moment, and concluded there was no way that Jenkins would leave her or Star stranded out there.

‘I’ll be fine.’

Peace walked outside and climbed on her bicycle. She had her smaller pack slung over her front.

‘Echo, you need to shut off your receivers now. Just in case Jenkins tries to lock onto our location for some reason.’

‘What if we need my maps?’

‘We’re not going to. That’s why I have this paper one.’

‘Oh. And what about keeping in contact with Star? Or if the director sends a message?’

‘I guess we will have to turn it on now and then, but we shouldn’t keep it on all the time. Just log on briefly here and there to check. Anyway, it’ll save your battery.’

‘But...well, I’ve never been offline before.’

‘And I’ve never left the Flagship. I guess this will be a day of firsts.’

‘Ok,’ Echo said with big eyes and a nervous little mouth on his screen. ‘I’m offline.’

Beetles

Out of the forest. Past the satellites. The trash heaps. The factories. When he got to the edge of the plantations, he killed his bike. Kicked the pedal down and leant against the handles while he waited. Every few seconds, he gave a sweep with his watch-arm. Knew he didn't need to. Just didn't want to stop. The movement had become something of a comfort. He made a note to kick the habit if he got through this Cloud. For now, it helped. He saw the dust rise in the distance before he heard the engine.

'Mornin' there young un'. Whatcha got for me today?'

He passed over a canister of fuel and another of clean water.

'The great conversationalist. What's this one then?'

He held up the photo on the phone.

'Never thought I'd see the day that you'd have one of those gadgets. Whole world's gone topsy-turvy. Any rate, lovely doin' business.'

The man drove off. Alone now, he got off the bike and trekked into the pine plantation. Pressed himself against a tree. As far as he could see, white pustules oozed out of the bark like baubles. He reached into his backpack and got out a sack. Crouching down, he gently shook all of the little brown beetles loose. He watched them as they orientated themselves. Started adventuring out into the foliage. Then he stamped the ground a few times so that they would disperse. He walked deeper into the plantation for a few minutes, then got the next sack out.

Just Visiting

‘What are you doing here? You shouldn’t have come. I can’t walk. I can’t move.’

‘I wanted to see you.’

‘We need to go. Before he comes back. Get rid of this tube.’

‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know. He’s poisoned me with...I don’t know what.’

‘Who did?’

‘The tubes, Peace. Get rid of the tubes.’

‘I can’t sorry.’

‘What? Why?’

‘I have to go. I’ll come back though, I promise.’

‘Don’t leave me!’

Alone with the trees. Seb tried speaking. Not even a murmur. At least there would be a way to tell when the delusions came knocking. He looked out above the trees and saw the sun. It didn’t hurt to stare at it. He wondered if this was how it had been for the others that had gone missing, but when he looked at the walls the punishment was too personalised.

‘Oh my God! Seb? Is that you?’

Run

Peace emerged from the pipe and tried looking up at the sun. It was already a clean circle in the sky. She remembered it seeming like a treat the first time, to look at something that you couldn't at any other time. Now it somehow seemed unnatural, like a spell.

The first thing that hit her was the greenery. She knew that it was only the plantations, but in class the plantations had always been described as something very fragile. As far as she could see, the road was lined with trees on either side. A lot of them looked a little brown up top, but that was to be expected with the droughts.

Getting her bike up the hill was a task. Once she had, she went straight into the cover of the plantation and got out her map. She wondered when would be the best time to get out a mask, and decided that sooner was better than later. She cleared a section in the leaves, tossing aside a couple of bulbous, brown beetles. The knife was on top, as well as the torch that she'd used in the pipe. Under them was a large piece of tarp that she laid out, setting the knife and torch on top. There was a long, bristly rope; several cans of different varieties of soup; a basic first aid kit; a small, folded down tent; a couple of bottles of water, a pair of goggles, and a set of masks.

'What's wrong?' came Echo's muffled inquiry. 'Why have we stopped?'

'Just doing a bit of an inventory,' Peace said.

'I'll check messages then.' A pause. 'We've got one. Not Star though. It's Mr. Jenkins.'

A pang of guilt. Then fear. Then rationalization. Her father wouldn't contact Director Jenkins for anything.

'Just play it from in there. I don't need to see the video.'

'I've been thinking Peace, why don't I send a driver around to get you and you can spend the Cloud over here? I should have thought about it before, but I've had a bit on my mind lately. I'll still be in meetings a lot of the time, but I know that Jane and Brenda would appreciate it. They are already driving each other up the wall, and I'm sure that things with your parents aren't any better. Let me know if you want to come around. You can even bring your roaches.'

She stared out into the pine plantation.

'Peace?'

'Yeah?'

'We should get a move on right?'

'Yeah.'

'If we don't hear from Star, I guess that we should make our own plan until we do. Which satellite sounded the best to you?'

'Newtown, I think. I mean, not saying that he has, but if Star really has done a runner and plans on being out here long term, wouldn't you say that he'd be in a place like that? Where there would still be facilities? I don't see him as the all-out nature type. Not permanently.'

'I really don't know, Peace. I don't see any other reason aside from running for him to be out here at all, but I just can't see him abandoning the Flagship. And us.'

‘I don’t know. Maybe he found out something that spooked him? Wanted to find out more?’

‘It kind of feels like it doesn’t it? I wonder what it is. I’ve always gotten the feeling that there’re a few things that Jenkins keeps away from us. But maybe he has to. If Star has been spooked, surely when we find him we can bring him back to his senses and take him home.’

‘However we plan on getting home.’

‘We can sort that part out when we get to it. For now, how amazing is this? We’re actually in one of the plantations. Not many people get to come out and see this. I feel like I’m in one of the VR docos at school about life before the PNR.’

‘Why isn’t there an exact year for the PNR?’

‘Wouldn’t be too much point in assigning one. It was all based on when we had taken things too far, and lots of different studies had different predictions and different years for that. It sort of snuck up on everybody in the end because all of the effects were feeding into each other and really sped the process up. The more that sea levels rose the more the ice melted. The more the ice melted the less it reflected sunlight. Some parts of the world got hot. Some of them got cold. Some plagued by drought. Other places with floods. But all of them became extreme. Hurricanes and dust storms and every other symptom of a failing planet imaginable with the land always sinking beneath the rising seas.’

‘How long had they known?’

‘The first scientist to put forward the idea was Svante Arrhenius in 1896.’

‘Why didn’t people stop?’

‘I guess it was just a theory at that point. Too abstract.’

‘What about when people started to be able to see it happening?’

‘Well, it is hard to say what they could have stopped. Nearly everything that a person did contributed. Everything that a person ate or bought or wore. A lot of people didn’t want to know because it was just too big to deal with.’

‘Not knowing doesn’t stop anything.’

‘But it does make it somebody else’s problem long after you’re dead. That’s why the Projects are so important. We might not still be making this mess, but somebody sure as hell has to clean it up.’

Peace looked out at the trees, but they didn’t make her feel warm like she’d always thought they would. Her eyes kept focussing out further and further, and the trunks stretched on into the distance.

‘Well even if Star has run off, I’m not going to. None of the satellites sound particularly stable do they? And not when I’m so close to getting into a Project. There’s nothing that could spook me out of investing.’

‘You’re jumping a bit ahead of yourself there don’t you think?’

‘I feel like I can already see it happening. Like I’m just going through the motions until it does.’

‘That’s how people get lazy. The others might choose pretty little bugs, but that won’t mean that they haven’t done just as much research as you. If not more. Isn’t the age cap 16?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, they’ve got a couple of years of school on you for starters.’

‘I know that.’

‘If you did get in, would you continue with roaches?’

‘I really don’t know. I’ve got some time to think about it, I guess. The world changes a lot in a few years. Who knows what problems are going to have cropped up by then?’

‘Thinking about all of these satellites, have you ever thought about whether the Flagship isn’t stable either? Just because we grew up in it, doesn’t mean that it has to last forever.’

‘What’s gotten into you today, Echo?’

‘I don’t know if it’s being offline or being out here but I feel really weird. So many things that seemed certain before don’t feel that way now. Maybe it’s because you’re growing up? And that means I’ll be changing too?’

‘You’re freaking me out a bit. I haven’t grown up since this morning and you seemed OK then. Do you want a reboot?’

‘No, I’m fine. I’m sorry. You’re right. Let’s head to Newtown. Star wouldn’t be out to kill anybody, but he wouldn’t be wiping his butt with leaves either.’

‘Yeah. It’ll be fun, going to a satellite. Meeting different people. Seeing the ways that people in the Surrounds live. Maybe that will sort out whatever it is you’re going through?’

‘Yeah. And the walk there will be like camp. Only we’ll actually get to be outside instead of in the hologardens at school.’

Peace slid the goggles on over her head and fixed the mask over her nose and mouth. Everything took on a sickly, green tint.

‘Can you still hear me?’

‘Sort of.’

‘It’s kind of hard to breathe in this thing.’

‘Keep it on. Mr. Fredricks wouldn’t have given it to you if it doesn’t work.’

She put everything back in, and then slung her little backpack on her chest first before she hoisted the larger one onto her back.

‘I wish I could be out there with you.’

‘Me too. This place is creeping me out. I’m looking forward to getting out of the plantation. Seeing some real trees.’

‘They’re real trees.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘That’s not very fair on them. They didn’t get to choose who planted them or where.’

‘Yeah, but you can’t see this. There are just loads and loads of pines. Nothing else as far as I can see. It doesn’t feel like the forests that we’ve seen in books and documentaries. Doesn’t feel...real, I guess is the only way that I can put it.’

After walking for a while Peace swapped to her hiking boots. They nibbled at her heels, but it was better than the pain she was getting across her soles. She put on an extra pair of socks when the first pair had bled through.

‘Echo?’

‘Yes?’

‘What are you thinking about?’

He paused for a moment.

‘What it’ll be like when we see Star.’

‘You’re not.’

‘I am.’

‘You’re thinking about Sunseeker.’

‘Kind of hard when she’s right here.’

‘I can try to fit her in the big pack if you like?’

‘No. It’s OK. It’s just...’

‘What?’

‘I knew that she’d be blank. But I didn’t think she’d be that blank. Was I like that when you first got me?’

‘Pretty much. You did stupid stuff for a while, but you learned quickly. It’s kind of like a puppy or a kitten. How they do really cute things like getting surprised when they sneeze or do something super clumsy.’

‘It just makes me uncomfortable to think that I could be like that again so easily.’

‘Well, you don’t have to worry about that. I’m not switching you off for a dumb phone. Not ever. Kind of surprised that Star did actually, but he didn’t have Sunseeker for as long as we have been together. Maybe if bots had come in earlier, he wouldn’t have been able to shut her away so easily.’

‘I know that you wouldn’t, but still...It’s hard to think that’s all I am. Just a shell. Just a mimic.’

‘I’ve known a lot of people that are little more than that. Hell, most of them. Anyway, you’ve got things that you like and dislike. That you find interesting. That you want to do in life.’

‘But all of those match up with you and grow with you. And Birch and Wattle are right, really. I’m programmed to think those things. It’s not like I even had an opportunity not to. You know what I mean? I’m not complaining, I’m really not. I’ve always known it. And I’m so glad that I’m synched up with you instead of some airhead that would have had me loving makeup and shoes.’

‘Maybe you’re right? Maybe all of this is just about getting a bit older? Maybe I’m changing and I don’t even see it, but I can see it in you? Star started changing a lot when he was about my age. Was less and less able to deal with Birch and Wattle. Got interested in a whole bunch of different stuff and didn’t want to play silly games anymore.’

‘Do you think that Sunseeker’s conscious is somewhere? Like, I realise how stupid this sounds, but in Star’s phone? Or just...somewhere? Where all of the information travels? It just doesn’t make sense that she can completely disappear. Just like that.’

‘That’s what happens when people die. Why wouldn’t it be the same for bots?’

‘Because we’re online. Well, we usually are. We’re everywhere. That’s the point of us. If I’m online and I really just sit down and focus it’s like I can feel a whole bunch of stuff going on around me even though I can’t make sense of it. And I can’t help but feel that Sun must be out there somewhere in all of that noise.’

‘I think that she’s just gone, but I guess that I don’t know anything about computers and electronics, so my opinion isn’t worth very much.’

‘Anyway. What are you thinking about?’

Peace sighed. She looked down at her terrarium. Because of the goggles, everything looked like she was underwater in an algae-infested, sunken part of the world.

‘I thought that being out in nature would be a little different. But with all of these trees in rows like this, it just kind of feels like home.’

‘If we’re going to SEQ10, there’s that whole patch of rainforest that’s been left alone. Remember when we watched that naff old video about it?’

‘I’ve been thinking about that, but I’m pretty sure that area is mostly what Mr. Fredricks shaded.’

‘Do you really think that Flagship people are going to be messing around in this Cloud?’

‘Probably not, but I’d feel pretty stupid if it was all for nothing. And Mr. Jenkins would never get over it. You know he wouldn’t. I know it’s stupid but he cares a lot more if I screw up than when Jane does. It’s like he expects her to, but with me he gets disappointed.’

‘When you were asking before about where I could imagine Star, if he was out here for a long time it would be Newtown for sure. But if it was only for a few days? Come on. Where else would he be?’

‘Imagine, Echo, if we got to see a real rainforest.’

‘We can. We just have to be smart about it.’

‘No more juice for Sunseeker, OK? I want to be able to take photos if we do that. Birch and Wattle would go wild.’

‘You’re actually going to tell them now?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe in a couple of years when I can’t get in trouble for it anymore. I don’t know why I would want to show them. It would just mean a lot to them to see that, you know? Do you think there’re any animals left in there?’

‘Probably. Otherwise the rainforest would have died off.’

‘I don’t know how it has stood its ground in the first place, to be honest.’

‘All those emissions before the PNR I guess. Beefed it up.’

‘The silver lining of the century.’

‘Should we send Star a message? Just while we are on the way to Newtown?’

‘Ready or not, here I come?’

‘Perfect.’

‘Should we send one to Jenkins as well?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t like that. I mean, I can’t see him checking the location, but just in case.’

‘You’re right, I just know that he likes messages from us on days like this. When he has so much stressing him out.’

‘He’s got Brenda and Jane to cheer him up.’

‘Ha ha, yeah right. Because talking endlessly about shopping will chill him out.’

‘Why are you friends with Jane, anyway?’

‘I don’t know. She never used to be that bad when we were little. We just used to draw and go for bike rides and fun stuff. Her mum has influenced her a lot. It would be weird to stop being friends now, considering how close I am with her dad.’

‘Do you think that she feels funny about that?’

‘Yeah. It’s not like I’m sucking up or anything. We’ve known each other my whole life. I’ve always looked up to him way more than Birch or Wattle.’

‘How did you even meet?’

‘Star had a bunch of intelligence tests when he was little and he got put in these programs and stuff. The Jenkins had a girl in them too, so we were always seeing each other at events. Mr. Jenkins took an interest in Star and I guess when I got older that grew to include me as well.’

‘Were you ever part of the programs?’

‘Birch and Wattle didn’t want me to after they saw all of the courses and stuff that Star got put into. They thought it wasn’t good for him. I still feel like that was where the rift between them and Star started.’

‘What happened to Jenkins’ older daughter?’

‘I was pretty little, so I can’t really remember how she died. He never talks about her unless he’s had a few drinks. He wasn’t anybody of influence at the time, just a low-level representative of the Projects sector. I don’t remember Birch and Wattle hating him that much back then, but maybe I wasn’t really interested. Maybe Mr. Jenkins wasn’t as outspoken then as he can be now as the Director for Projects. I feel like I have a lot of memories of going to their house as a whole family, but Birch and Wattle say that never happened.’

‘It’s weird when I find out new things about our family.’

Peace kept tramping through the pines, her steps punctuated by the crunch of pine needles and the brown beetles.

‘Why do you think there’s so many of just one type of beetle here?’

‘Maybe it helps the trees to grow? Keeps away a pest that harms them or something?’

‘I don’t know if it’s working too well, then. The trees don’t look too good.’

Peace stopped for a moment. Scouted around.

‘I thought that the brown might be from drought, but if that was it then all the trees would be brown, wouldn’t they? I mean, if they hadn’t been getting enough water, it wouldn’t make sense for the brown to be patchy like it is.’

‘I guess.’

‘And the brown ones all have these funny white lumps on them.’

‘The beetles wouldn’t be here if they didn’t help, Peace. That’s what people like Star are for. Helping the world, now that it can’t help itself.’

‘What do we use all of this pine for?’

‘I guess paper would be a lot of it. Furniture, too. It’s easy to forget about things like that, isn’t it? When we don’t see it all of the time.’

‘But everything gets recycled?’

‘Maybe it’s not enough and they need to top it up?’

‘There are a lot of trees here, Echo. And our Flagship reached capacity like five years ago, so it can’t be because there are more people than there used to be.’

‘I wonder how long the plantation goes on for?’

‘I guess we’re gonna find out. Hey. A message.’

‘That was fast. Text again?’

‘Yup. Weird huh? There must be a reason. Maybe it’s harder to send big video files that far away from a Flagship?’

‘What does it say?’

‘Run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run. What is that?’

She smiled.

‘It’s this batty old song that Birch used to sing when we were kids. He’d sing it when we were playing hide and seek. To try to freak us out. It used to scare the hell out of us.’

‘Why?’

‘It was mostly the way he sang it I think. It was all about not getting caught and being made into pie. People sing really scary things to kids sometimes.’

‘Should I respond?’

‘I guess so. I’m so excited, Echo! Star’s all right and we’re on an adventure and I feel like the whole world is at our feet right now. Respond with *Don’t give the farmer his fun, fun, fun.*’

‘People are weird. Parent people particularly.’

A blue truck pulled up on the road. Peace hadn’t realised that they were so close.

‘Shhh.’

An older man got out. He was in a wide-brimmed hat and old jeans. Leaning against his truck, he pulled a cigarette out of his pocket. Peace hoped that somehow the trees were lining up

and he couldn't see her, but it only made sense that if she could see him, then he could see her as well. He was facing her way, wheezing out big draughts of smoke.

'Sorry to say it, honey-boo, but you're not blending in too well there. What with the turtle pack and all. You need a lift somewhere?'

'Should we pretend that we didn't hear him?' Peace whispered.

'I don't know. If we don't respond, he might get shirty.'

'Come on out why don't you, darlin'?'

Peace slowly walked out of the forest.

'I'm quite all right by myself. Really I am. I prefer it in fact.'

'Of course you are, but somebody sent me, you see?'

'I don't have anybody out here.'

'Oh but you do. A certain brother that would rather that you weren't out in the air for too long. Not good for the lungs,' he boomed with a big guffaw that caught in his throat and ended up with him drawing up a mass of phlegm from the bottom of his belly like a human coffee plunger. He shot the glob into the scrub with expertise.

'You know my brother?'

'Not personally. Well, maybe. I've probably given him a lift at some point. All I know is that I was meant to be finding a little girl of just your description in this very spot at this very time. Or have I come across the wrong Miss Kelly?'

Envelope

He waited in the plantation for some time. Flat on the ground with the pine beetles occasionally scuttling over his hands, chest, and ankles. He dug his fingers under the pine needles and tried not to move. After enough time, he began to get a heavy sensation in his stomach and chest, like the whole of him was being dragged into the earth. He stayed like that, not wanting to move a finger or a toe. Not his watch. Not anything. A warm, buzzing sensation started all over that made him feel like he wasn't something by itself anymore. Part of something bigger. But before long the memories clawed their way in.

He stood up, gave his watch a couple of sweeps, and then brought it in for closer inspection. He got back on his bike and started riding to the exit. Halfway there, the beat up, blue truck passed with a flare of red hair in the passenger seat. He pulled over to the side of the road. Somehow, none of it had felt real until then. He took a few moments to breathe.

He kept along the road, heading back out to the factory ring. When he got to the first one, the foreman was already waiting out front.

'You got three days to make it work hear? After that, we're shutting her down. We're the first one in the line of fire here. I hope you've considered that.'

He held up an envelope without getting off his bike. The foreman came over and snatched it up, fumbling to open it, and then nodded. He got out the next envelope, slightly slimmer, and tucked it into his pocket. Then, he set his sights on the nearest column of smoke.

Cockatiel

It was getting darker outside now. The dull orange orb marked that it was midday. Seb had had a few visitors, but it was never as bad as when she came.

‘I really hope you’re not on your way.’

‘What do you mean, silly? I’m already here.’

‘No you’re not. Not really.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m talking. When I’m talking it means it’s not real.’

‘Do you remember when we were kids and we found that little cockatiel with the clipped wings in our backyard? Some rich schmo’s pet? Do you remember how excited we were?’

‘I was sure that was the last one that we’d ever see. I don’t think I ever fought Birch and Wattle as hard for anything as I did for that little bird. I was there when they let it go, too. Saw it kind of skip off with these clumsy dips and weaves.’

‘I know. I was watching from my window. What do you think happened to it?’

‘It would have been eaten by a cat or something. For sure.’

‘So, was it the last one that you saw?’

‘You know...I think it was.’

Steak

‘Where are we headed?’

‘Newtown.’

‘Is my brother there?’

‘Afraid not, sorry. But there’s a friend of his that’ll meet you at the gate. Folk are pretty friendly in there, too. You might want to consider staying a while if you have the time.’

Driving at this speed was very different to driving in the Flagship, and she found herself feeling nauseous. She looked out of the window for things to focus on. There was a series of signs along the road. 100 km to Newtown. 95. 90. The signs were neat, but still clearly home-crafted.

‘Aren’t they afraid of people knowing where they are? Drifters?’ she asked. She must have had a mortified look on her face afterwards because he chuckled and said, ‘Don’t worry, Miss Kelly. I have a place of my own and always have. Damn near everybody knows where Newtown is. Proud people. And as for drifters, we haven’t had problems with people like that for a long time. They’ve been forced out into the dark and dusty parts of the world, as far as I know. They were barely even an issue when I was a kid.’

‘Really? That’s all they ever tell us about in schools. I guess the teachers have never been outside though.’

‘Hmmm. Good lot school does for you. Bunch of people telling you about something that they don’t do themselves. Doesn’t seem right, does it? Then again, maybe they told you all those lies for a reason. Never hurts to give you sprites a bogeyman to keep you in line,’ he chuckled to himself.

‘I don’t think so. I don’t think it’s ever all right to lie to somebody.’

‘That’s a good lass. The world could sure do with more of it these days. You might be in for a few surprises over the next couple of days though.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Best for you to go asking folk yourself as far as I see it.’

‘Why? Why not tell me now?’

‘Sometimes a person isn’t ready to hear an answer until they’ve thought of the question.’

‘I guess I’d best start asking questions then.’

‘Fire away.’

‘How did they build Newtown?’

‘Most of it was there already. Old towns from pre-Flagship times. It just needed a bit of fixing up is all.’

‘Are they like Boundary?’

‘Not in any way that I can think of. Which way were you meaning exactly?’

‘About there being one in each sub-region.’

‘Oh. No, little lady. Newtown is a one and only. And on account of that, I’m guessing you might find more than one familiar face.’

‘This friend of my brother’s, do I know him?’

‘Didn’t say. People don’t tell me a lot about why I’m doing much of anything. Just that it needs to get done. Easier that way, I suppose.’

Rows of bobbing lanterns began to appear through the Cloud, with what looked like nothing supporting them. Peace thought of the angler fish that they had once learned about in school, and how before the PNR people had known more about space than the deep sea. She wondered whether those tables would ever be able to be turned now, or if the sea had largely boiled up into one giant, grotesque gumbo.

They drove down between the lanterns and arrived at a building at the end. It looked like some sort of community hall. Peace figured that this part of the old town might have been a housing estate. She could dimly see the crosshatch pattern of high nets on either side of the driveway that they had just come down, which at least explained the lanterns.

‘No golfers today,’ wheezed the old man as he laughed. He clucked his tongue and then ran it over the four or five remaining teeth in his mouth. ‘Well, this is you, Miss Kelly. Thank you for the company, and good luck to you. I mean that most sincerely.’

As she was getting her packs out of the back of the ute, she saw somebody running out of the building ahead, waving his arms through the haze. She straightened up to greet him, but he went straight to the driver’s window. She saw the man pass across a couple of bottles of

something, and then get in the front. After she had shut the door, the truck took off and she was left alone in the driveway.

‘Can I come out yet?’ Echo asked through the bag.

‘Soon. Just let me get us inside.’

She went through the double doors and there was a round-faced woman with soft eyes sitting behind a desk.

‘Good afternoon dear.’

‘It’s afternoon already?’

‘It is. Hard to tell out there, I know. How can I help?’

‘There’s somebody expecting me. A friend of my brother’s.’

‘We have a few people in the waiting room today. A bit of a mass exodus from your front, in fact. Sorry, there I go making assumptions again. Are you from the Flagship?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You can put your things down and start on your paperwork while I call your friend for you. What’s their name?’

Peace looked up sheepishly.

‘Don’t know huh? That’s all right. Not everybody does. May I ask yours?’

‘Peace Kelly.’

‘That’s an interesting name, isn’t it, love? Alrighty, you just sit tight right down over there with this clipboard and we can get you sorted.’

Peace wrote her name on the line at the top of the paperwork and noticed how thick the booklet was. At first she figured that it must just be a bunch of copies, but upon leafing through she saw that it was a single application. Everything from where her parents grew up to if she’d ever had diphtheria. She decided to focus on the first page so that she wouldn’t freak herself out. She’d never had to fill out something like this by herself before. The first choice was length of stay. She thought for a minute before ticking ‘undetermined.’ Reason for stay. Considered it for a while again before ticking ‘other.’ Just as she was wondering how many ambiguous answers she’d be able to give before they turned her back out into the Cloud, she heard, ‘Peace?’

She dropped the clipboard.

‘Phil?’

‘How are you?’

She sat stunned for a moment before rushing over to give him an enormous hug. He was dressed in suit pants and a button up shirt, but he still had the same goofy grin and lanky arms and legs that she remembered from school.

‘What are you doing out here?’

‘I’m inclined to ask you the same. I work out here now.’

‘You ran away?’

‘Not quite. I needed to get out, but they have placement programs for people like me. Don’t want to lose us entirely you see? Kind of a gap year, if you get my meaning. Or couple of years.’

‘Is that what Star’s done? Sorry, Sebastian.’

‘It’s OK. The only one that takes that Sebastian stuff seriously is him. And no, I have no idea what the hell Star is doing out here. I mean, he came out for a meeting with me a couple of weeks ago, but he should have been long back by now. He’s not due for another meeting for a good couple of months. I hope he hasn’t gone rogue on us.’

‘He’s been out before?’

Phil turned to the dumpy lady who was thoroughly enjoying her stamping back at her desk.

‘Sorry, Maddy. I know that I’m not meant to ask you this, and I really don’t want to put you in a spot, but...would it be all right if I took her down for a sandwich and a cup of tea first? There’re a few things that I probably need to be open about before she’s going to be wanting to fill out anything. And I could help her with the forms when we’re done.’

She pursed her lips, but her eyes were all lit up.

‘I suppose. But she has to come back up with the forms, mind. And don’t you go spreading that around or everybody will be wanting special treatment.’

‘Thanks,’ he said with a wink before heading over to grab Peace’s things.

‘Gross.’

‘Oh stop it. Come on. Let’s go get some food into you.’

She’d felt so sick in the car that she hadn’t really thought about eating, but the concept was pretty appealing once she’d heard ‘food’ now. She considered asking for the pack so that she didn’t look like a wimp, but the soles of her feet felt bruised and it would only make them worse with all of that weight.

When they got downstairs, Phil sat her down at the table.

‘Requests?’

‘Anything would be amazing.’

‘Alrighty, I got you. The big day is over. Time to rest.’

While he was in the line to get food, Peace kept feeling tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. She shook them off, but her eyes must have been red when he got back.

‘No shame in that, Peace. Even if you were lucky enough to get through safely, it’s still a hell of a way out here. It’s a lot to cope with. I got escorted out here by Flagship Tech and it was still a complete mind melt.’

He pushed forward some mac and cheese, a steak and a giant strawberry milkshake.

‘Time to get some junk into you after all of those years of bunny food, huh? You should have seen what Star ate in his first year of uni. I don’t know how he didn’t end up being morbidly obese. I see you like the terrarium. I helped him pick that,’ Phil said proudly.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. He’s terrible at giving gifts. Doesn’t bother with most people. He really wanted to find something worthwhile for you, though. It been keeping all right?’

‘Yeah. It just needs a couple of drops of water every few months. To be in the sun when it can.’

‘There were lots of different types at the shop. Ones with little animals in them and stuff. He was pretty fascinated by those. Took quite some convincing to sway him onto that one.’

‘I’m glad that you did. It would be creepy as hell to have little things living in there.’

‘Well, you still do.’

‘Not things with brains though,’ Peace pointed out.

‘Lot of creatures don’t have brains. Like starfish and jellyfish.’

‘Still, it’s weird. Thanks for settling him on this one. The only time I take it off is when I’m sleeping.’

‘No worries. I’ve certainly steered your brother away from more than one stupid decision.’

Peace started with the steak.

‘So what do you mean that you guys had a meeting?’

‘Strap in, this all might be a bit much to handle,’ Phil said, leaning across the table. He looked at Peace with a mix of guilt, relief, and excitement. ‘Star and I meet up a bit. We have a lot of crossover with our work. Two sides to the same hammer, as it were.’

‘Which one is the claw fixing up all of the screw ups?’

‘That would probably be me. But you didn’t hear it from me that way. Star is in an awful hurry a lot of the time.’

‘You’re not hungry?’

‘Been grazing in here all day. If I eat another cheeseburger I think I’ll puke.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t know you’d be waiting.’

‘Not at all. Strange times when somebody like you turns up on our doorstep.’

‘So what do you have to do with Star’s fruit bats?’

‘It’s still doctoral work at this stage. Early days. Basically, I’m modding seeds and he’s working on getting them out there.’

‘So you have a lab here and everything?’

‘I do, but I mainly go out to a few banks that we have set up. Top secret stuff,’ he smirked. ‘I’d love nothing more than to tell all the bigwigs before the PNR that the most important banks of the future will be full of nothing but seeds.’

‘How’s he been doing?’

‘He’s seemed all right, but you know your brother. Maybe when you see him you could get back to me about him? In a bit of a pickle if he’s lost it and gone out to The Ranges or something.’

‘Sure.’

She unzipped her bag and Echo hovered out.

‘Echo, can you link up with his phone?’

Echo’s eyes were replaced by a slow motion tick.

‘Thanks.’

Echo sat down next to her plate. ‘That looks amazing. I wish I could eat that.’

‘So Star’s fruities will help with the seeds?’ Peace asked.

‘Yup. They’re long-range dispersers.’

‘Like birds?’

‘Indeed. There’s a few others focussing on different species of birds and other dispersers, but Star’s bats seem to be the leading contenders.’

‘What does it taste like?’ Echo asked.

‘The bats?’

‘No, the steak.’

‘Jesus, Echo, I dunno. Like a steak?’ she looked back across at Phil. ‘What kind of changes are you making to the seeds?’

‘Working on resilience mostly. They’re never going to be fully drought- and flood-proof, but we do what we can. I know this sounds stupid, but sometimes when I’m in the banks it’s like I can feel a new world right around me. Like it’s giving off a heat. All that stuff in there, just ready to grow up into new forests and go nuts with all the carbon dioxide in the air.’

‘Will you get to name them?’

‘Ha ha, the forests? I don’t know. We don’t even know when we are going to be able to get the seeds out there. Everybody expects this sort of stuff to get pumped out a couple of years after you have the means, but it’s life-long work projecting all the potential problems.’

‘I can’t tell you how good it is to hear this, though. Sometimes all the idiotic ramblings of my parents start to make me doubt things. I can’t wait until I’m around the Projects and people like you all of the time so I don’t have that junk floating around in my head. I just hope that Star’s OK.’

Peace took a slurp of the shake. Just like home.

‘If you ask me, Star probably just needs a break. We all get to that point sometimes. Just need to get away. Get your head out of Flagship Tech for a bit. They can arrange passes and support for that kind of thing, you know. Even if Star does just go wandering. Different continents even. I know a few people who’ve done it. It can end up pretty valuable for the Flagship in the long run. You get a pretty interesting perspective on how the world is now by going to different Flagships around the nation and other countries where they don’t even have Flagships.’

‘Wow, really? It’s funny. I’ve never thought about that. I guess I just assumed that every country had their own sort of equivalent.’

‘That just means that Flagship Ed pumped you out exactly the way they wanted to. No shame in it. I didn’t start thinking about the world properly until I got my scholarship to go across to the Projects. Got a bit of distance from the fodder that they feed all the kids.’

‘Why would Flagship Ed want to create people that couldn’t help the system?’

‘Well they actually create people that will help the system the most. Think about it. How many people are there in your cohort? Let’s say 70?’

‘Yeah.’

‘OK, let’s do a generous estimate that five of you end up in the Projects and five others on committees. That still leaves 60 people who are going to grow up and not be able to hold any role that will actively contribute to the Flagship right? But those 60 people are where the means comes from Peace. They’re what gives us the resources and materials that the Projects need to be able to function.’

‘I know that.’

‘So then wouldn’t it make sense for the base education that people get to be focussed just on the Flagship and their part? If all they need to be doing is taking jobs where they market and transport something like novelty erasers, and make sure they buy plenty of stuff in their off hours, then I think Flagship Ed prepares them perfectly well for that.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘Well, so is the rest of the world right now. At least you’ve got the best chance possible at being the butcher and not one of the cattle. And don’t most people seem happy enough? The Flagship has tapped into the human desire to do little and be rewarded for it. I bet that if you went up to somebody on the street who was rummaging through a sale bin buying five new pairs of shoes and offered them a job in a Project they’d laugh you right out of the store. People like not having to do much and still get to feel important. Like they contribute. Matter.’

‘I can see why you had to get out.’

‘Yeah, it wasn’t good for me in there. I’ll go back eventually. I wouldn’t want to have a family or grow old out here. That would be madness. I just need a break. Star probably does too.’

‘You reckon that’s why he asked me to come out? I mean, he knows that I could ask Jenkins. But he could ask Jenkins just as easily. He knows that he would get a yes on something like that. I don’t know. It’s all very weird.’

‘What do you mean he asked you?’

‘Why? What did he say in your message?’

‘He just said that you’d left and needed a place to stay on the way to him.’

‘What?! I don’t even know where he is. He sent me a message to come and find him this morning. It seems so dumb now, but I certainly didn’t just run off.’

‘It isn’t dumb. You didn’t know what it would be like out here. They wrap us up in cotton wool in the Flagship. And your brother certainly has a sort of charisma. He’s going to be the face of something big for the Flagship for sure.’

She buried herself in her mac and cheese.

‘Peace?’

‘I just don’t get why he would say that to you, you know? Make it seem like I’m some stupid kid who made a split decision and now he’s having to pick up the pieces. That’s not fair.’

‘Have you told Jenkins?’

‘No. How could I? He would lose it and come out to get me right away.’

‘True. What do I say if he calls, though?’

‘You won’t get a call. He won’t even know that I’m gone. I’ll get to Star and figure out what the hell is going on and have him back before this Cloud is even over.’

Phil smiled.

‘I don’t know how you grew up so normal in that mental asylum, Peace. If you want some help with your brother, I can go with you, if you’d like? We can’t really work much during Clouds because the Flagship shuts down. And no offence, but I don’t really like the idea of sending a fourteen-year-old out there by herself.’

‘She’s not by herself,’ Echo piped up.

‘Sorry, buddy. It’s just that, well, you know what they always told us in school about how people can be out here. I know a lot of it isn’t true, but it just seems a bit needlessly reckless, don’t you think?’

‘Help would be amazing. And you can tell me about all of the stuff that we pass! And yeah, I have been a bit worried about bumping into people. Have you had any run-ins?’

‘Yeah. A couple. Only if I’ve gone on walks. Usually people fresh out of the Flagship, funnily enough. They’re scared mostly. The world changes fast these days. Heck, these cities were only established when we were growing up.’

Peace reclined in her chair.

‘More?’

‘Not if you don’t want to end up with partially digested macaroni all over your face.’

‘Lovely. Well, let’s get into this paperwork, huh? I can see that you’re raring to.’

‘What do I need it for?’

‘It’s box ticking stuff, mainly. Newtown may have diverged from a lot of Flagship ways, but bureaucracy has long and invasive tendrils.’

‘Will they alert anybody that I’m gone?’

‘No. The Flagship doesn’t care too much who’s out here as long as they aren’t causing any trouble.’

He grabbed the clipboard from her.

‘Gender?’

She picked up her straw and flicked milkshake remnants at him.

‘Oi! These are serious documents and serious business you know?’

They got through the rest of the questions and brought them back up to the lady at administration. Peace was officially allowed into the community, even though she got the feeling that nobody would have done too much if she had just decided to stroll in anyway.

Phil walked her down the streets of Newtown to his apartment. It was a lot more wholesome than the Flagship. People didn’t seem to be obsessed with buying tacky decorative lawn ornaments to demonstrate just how much they were contributing. The clothes that people had on looked a little worn. Not ratty by any means, just not replaced every few months. There

were no massive advertisements dominating her line of sight, and the houses were simple. But there was still something that was nagging at her as they walked around together. They had food, water, and safety, but they weren't doing anything to deserve it. It didn't seem right that they should have access to those things without investing and giving back. Just like The Ranges and the Boundaries, Peace couldn't help but feel that the people were just existing.

She was trying not to start using labels, but the more that she started thinking the harder it got. Pretty soon, the idea that the people around her were of the same species was strange. Phil still seemed normal, but everybody else that she passed by, smiled at, and saw going about their daily lives seemed so alien. They might have had the same number of legs and arms and eyes, but there was still something that seemed totally opposite to every other person she'd met in her life. Peace couldn't quite put her finger on it, but figured that it must have something to do with their line of thinking, almost in the same way that animals start to evolve in different ways when a population is split up in different places. Only it hadn't taken generations to change. Pretty soon Birch and Wattle's ideas of being human set in, and she kept herself busy so that she wouldn't go too far down that road.

Drafts

After he'd done the rounds of the factories, he went home to refuel. He had considered going into the guardhouse, but that seemed a little pointless. He had what he wanted. Now he'd just leave the guy to whatever his own brain had in store for him.

He spent a few hours in the gardens, and then took a shower and lay down. He couldn't remember when, but sleep had become just that. Lying down. Opening his eyes to the slightest sound. Or thought. Dreams a thing of dreams.

The next morning, he took his time. He knew that she wouldn't go anywhere until he'd sent something. He set himself up with breakfast before he thought about the message. It took a while to get into the mindset. The language. He wished that he could have taken notes, but that wasn't the kind of thing that he was willing to risk putting on paper. It went through a few drafts. It had to be cryptic. Playful.

Phil's going out to the labs today and I really don't want to be a burden on him. Plus it's been a whole day and I don't know how long this Cloud is going to hold up. I might have to go back soon. Please tell me where you are.

Go with Phil. I'll come and pick you up tonight OK? I just have a bit to do before then.

Really?! OK! Can we go out tomorrow and see forests and rivers and everything?

Sure. I'll give you the grand tour. I promise.

Silence

‘What will you do when you finish your study?’ Peace asked.

‘Jenkins has promised me a team. If I play it right now, I stand a chance at making a proper difference. Just like we always spoke about out the front of Mr. Fredricks’. Wouldn’t that be something? He said I’ll get my own lab and whatever resources I need. Maybe you could even be a part of it one day.’

‘Will you be out of the dorms then? I was thinking, maybe we could get a place together? Since I’m going to wind up there anyway.’

‘You’re asking the wrong person aren’t you?’

‘You mean I should ask Mr. Jenkins?’

‘There’s not a lot that you’d ask for that he’d say no to. I’d love to have you there in the city centre. Tell you what. If I get out of this mess, I’ll suggest it to you.’

‘I don’t like it when you talk to me like that. Like I’m not even here.’

Then she was gone. No flicker, no exit. Just gone.

‘Peace? I’m sorry,’ Star thought.

Silence.

‘Come back.’

Blue

‘You’re sure that you don’t mind me tagging along? I mean, I can understand you being secretive about this sort of thing,’ Peace said, doing a poor job of masking her excitement.

‘It’s OK. It’s cool that you’re so interested. And I mean, in a couple of years you’re going to be with us anyway,’ Phil said.

‘I don’t know. I mean, I love animals. And it kills me to think of a world without them. But I just don’t know if I’m the kind of person that can go cutting them up or anything like that. And I don’t want to get all Birch and Wattle, but changing animals to do something would make me a bit uncomfortable. I guess I don’t mind that it happens, but I don’t know if I want an active hand in it. Plants seem a bit less complicated than all of that.’

‘See how you go. You might change your mind when you get older. Don’t forget, you have to get through your whole course before you get to make that kind of decision. But if you still feel that way in a few years, then there would most definitely be a spot for you on this Project. But make no mistake, you’re still making something do things that it wouldn’t have without you changing it.’

‘It just feels a little different with plants is all.’

The blue truck pulled up outside the hall.

‘Oh, I know this guy.’

‘You got a ride in with him huh? Most people do. There’re not too many people who drive around out here. Especially in a Cloud. Pays well, though. I would usually go in a Flagship van, but this is going to have to do for today.’

They got in the back of his truck, and Phil passed forward a wrapped package.

‘What’s in it?’

‘Food and some chocolates for your kids.’

He grunted.

‘Nice to see you again Miss Kelly.’

‘I’m sorry, but I don’t know if I caught your name the first time.’

‘No worries. It’s Blue.’

‘Just Blue?’

‘That’s what my mum said.’

‘Well, thank you, Blue. Again.’

‘Anything for a lovely little lady.’

He turned around to look at Phil less amicably.

‘Where to, Big Spender?’

‘I’ll direct you as we go.’

Peace was glued to the window as they weaved through the black.

‘Blue?’

‘Yes m’dear?’

‘How come you didn’t ask me to pay you when I came in yesterday?’

Blue looked in the rear-view mirror.

‘There was payment waiting with the message from your brother.’

‘How did you get the message?’

‘It was waiting in Newtown.’

She nodded as she kept looking out of the window.

‘You have children?’

‘I do. Two little ones. Boy and a girl.’

The way that he said it stopped her from asking about their mother. Peace rifled around in the bottom of her pack. She’d brought both of them with her, even though Phil had insisted that she wouldn’t need them. It didn’t seem right to leave anything behind, seeing that was all she had. She took out the picture books and put them on the front passenger seat.

‘You don’t need to do that lassie.’

‘I know. I want to. All kids should have books.’

‘Are you suggesting that they don’t?’

‘Oh no, sir, I wasn’t, I just—’

He hacked out a fresh laugh.

‘Just kidding ya, just kidding ya.’

He turned around and smiled, spinning back just at the right moment before he had to swerve.

‘Thank you. They are six and eight. They’ll really enjoy that.’

Peace took a deep breath.

‘I’m glad. How do you know where you’re going when it’s like this?’

‘You kind of get used to it. People can get used to most things, can’t they? What you two might see as shapes and shadows, I see clear as day.’

‘Damn it!’ Phil exclaimed.

‘What lad?’

‘We needed to go left back there. I’ve been this way a hundred times. Can’t see a thing.’

Blue brought the truck to a halt and then artfully spun it around.

‘This business would be a good deal easier if I knew where I was going.’

‘I’d rather not.’

‘Your call.’

‘Blue?’

‘Yes Miss Kelly?’

‘Do you live in The Ranges?’

‘In a way.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Well, I was born there. But that’s not usually what folks mean when they ask if you live in The Ranges. I mean, I drive the truck, for one. Folks up there don’t like that too much. And there’s a hell of a lot of other things I do that probably annoys ’em. They don’t say it though.’

‘Why?’

‘They’re all starry-eyed for old Blue because I’ve lived out there so long. Taught half of ’em how to get by.’

‘Are many people born out there?’

‘Not many. And less make it alive. Let me tell you from experience, Miss Kelly, if you happen to find yourself with child, don’t be doing it out there in the wild. It ends up poorly a hell of a lot more times than it ends up well.’

‘I don’t see myself having that problem.’

‘That’s good, lassie.’

‘Did your mother die in childbirth?’ Peace asked.

‘Peace,’ Phil warned.

‘Don’t cut the lady off, Big Spender, it’s natural for young people to ask questions. That’s how you end up with a lot that’s smarter than your own lot. Or didn’t they teach you that in the Flagship?’

‘Sorry.’

‘To answer your question, no she didn’t. My mother was a tough old sow. Had a couple of us, too. I don’t know where the others have gotten to. Or if they’re even around anymore. Something tells me no. They’d be coming around asking for favours otherwise.’

Haw, haw, haw, Blue boomed.

‘But as for Mum, she died only a few years back. From drinking the water near our place. When I got old enough I had a stab at telling her that she shouldn’t do that. That things weren’t quite like they were when she was young. Boy, did she give me a whooping for that one.’

He gave such a cackle that Peace was certain they would veer right off the road.

‘Funny part was that’s what did her in, in the end. World’s not the same as it was, Miss Kelly. No siree. Gotta watch yourself these days. Even the water is out to getcha.’

Guffaw, guffaw, guffaw.

Phil was looking anxiously out the window at the vague, grey forms.

‘Turn right here, please,’ said Phil.

‘Yes Sir.’

Blue turned the truck at the last second and it screeched around the corner.

‘You’re a real livewire kid, you know that?’

‘Turn left here.’

He narrowly missed a sign post.

‘And right here.’

The truck leapt over a speed bump with big chunks out of it so that one side jumped a lot higher than the other. Peace’s pack slammed into her.

‘Are you all right in there, Echo?’

‘Yeah. Upside-down but all right.’

‘OK. Stop here please.’

‘There’s nothing out here?’ said Peace.

‘We’ll walk the rest,’ said Phil.

‘You wanted me to wait, right?’ Blue asked, with a look of concern at Peace.

‘Yes. I have a few other places I need to go after this,’ Phil said.

Blue flicked a lever and his seat popped down heavily onto Phil’s legs. Phil awkwardly squeezed out of the truck as Blue reached over and selected one of the picture books that Peace had left on the front seat.

‘I’ll be quizzing you on that when I get back,’ she joked.

‘No point darlin’, can’t read. The pictures look nice though.’

She frowned.

‘Is that common out here?’

‘Not being able to read? Sweetie, anybody from out here simply doesn’t have a need for it. Anybody born on the land outside of a satellite or a Flagship wouldn’t have the foggiest,’ he proclaimed, and then licked his finger before he turned the page.

Peace hoisted on her smaller pack.

‘Since we’re coming back, can I leave my big pack?’

Phil looked at Blue suspiciously.

‘No worries, Miss Kelly. I’ll keep it safe for ya.’

Peace started following Phil.

‘Do you think that Blue might have heard something about where Star is?’ Echo asked from inside of the backpack.

‘It doesn’t exactly seem like he’d have a phone or anything. How did you get in contact with him?’

‘He comes by Newtown a lot. There’s always somebody who needs something.’

After about twenty minutes they reached some plots with hundreds of saplings. Almost all of the plants were failing, and each of them had a thin piece of plastic driven into the ground in front of it bearing combinations of letters and numbers.

‘Urgh! You just can’t leave this stuff alone,’ Phil mumbled as he kicked at a plant on the edges of the plot that didn’t have a tag.

‘What’s wrong with that one?’

‘We’re not trying to grow it, that’s what’s wrong. It’s called devil’s twine. Invasive damn thing.’

Phil knelt down and began grabbing fistfuls of a vine that was clinging to the wooden barriers around the plots and reaching inside.

‘Was it an introduced species?’

‘By us?’

‘No, pre-PNR. Before people knew what they were doing.’

‘Unfortunately, no.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s able to give us so much trouble because it’s native. Native plants have developed defences against it because they all developed together.’

‘Why is there so much of it?’

‘It got used as a sort of biological control for a while around the PNR for fighting introduced species.’

‘I guess it must have worked pretty well then.’

‘Yup. It gets its little suckers on them and drains water and nutrients until they shrivel up. It’s not too clever, though,’ Phil said pointing to the starving patches of the vine that had stopped to suckle on the wooden fence. ‘Damn thing will even latch onto concrete and metals.’

‘But the Flagship only plants native species?’

‘Well, they can’t be one hundred percent native, can they? Not if they are going to survive. Look, these ones have been beefed up and modified and they still couldn’t hack the Cloud. So now that we need to introduce species it is very hard with vampires like this skulking around.’

‘Why can’t we develop defences for them?’

‘We can, it just all takes time. One day it’ll be all right if there’s devil’s twine sniffing all around these guys for something to leech off. Shouldn’t have too much of an effect, just like it is with native species.’

Peace kept close to Phil as he walked between the plots to a large hill. She began to make out an enormous metal door in the rock, and the closer they got the more the Flagship Tech logo became clear. Peace stood beneath the silvery sprout bursting through the footpath and looked up at it with pride.

‘I bet this is what it would feel like to see your flag on the Moon or Mars or something.’

She thought of an old picture that she had found once, a picture of a time when there was just one flag on the Moon, before space had become something of a distraction from the failing systems of their own planet and every country, billionaire, and big name brand wanted in. Peace imagined that the poor Moon looked somewhat more like an echidna these days. Then she

thought about echidnas for a while, from megafauna to their PNR size and through to their extinction. She imagined what they would look like scuttling through the scrub around her and then stopped because it hurt to think about that. She looked to the side to see Phil patiently waiting.

‘That’s going to happen a lot over the next couple of days.’

‘What?’

‘Just losing yourself in thought. Imagination. Things you have never considered before. Never really had the capacity or ability to. You’ll find yourself just watching trails of ants or leaves falling down into the undergrowth and it’ll be like lights are flickering on in your brain. Neurons waking up and firing for the first time.’

‘It just feels like getting lost.’

‘Soon you’ll get past that feeling and just enjoy the rambling thoughts. That’s the hard thing about how much the Flagship defines itself by the Projects. They rely on science, but scientists were born to ask more questions than the Flagship would probably like.’

Peace turned back to the Flagship Tech logo on the colossal door in front of her.

‘They weren’t mucking around.’

‘It’s a no-expenses-spared account. Not too many of those at the moment. They used to give them out like candy.’

‘Are there any cameras in there?’

‘Of course. I can disable them though. Claim it as an effect of the Cloud.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah,’ Phil said casually, but with a nervous smile.

First he went in by himself, scanning his thumbprint at the door. Peace stood looking around her. The trees weren’t quite so ordered here, but a lot of them were still quite small. She didn’t figure it for reforestation due to the randomness. Everywhere there was devil’s twine and other plants like it searching out anything that didn’t belong, and strangling anything that they weren’t sure of.

When Phil popped his head out of the door Peace was lost in thought again.

‘It gets worse the further you go out. Except for a couple of protected regions.’

‘What stops them from growing?’

‘A number of things. A lot of the problem is the swinging between the drought and the storms. The Flagship get so particular about only modding native species, but there isn’t anywhere for them to be native to anymore. Things have changed too fast and the plants haven’t had a chance to catch up yet. Planting native stuff that hasn’t been modded now is the same as planting an exotic tree. And the soil doesn’t help either.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Again, a few reasons – there usually are. The biggest one is how often people used to plant the same type of thing in the same area over and over.’

‘You mean like they are still doing with the plantations?’

‘One battle at a time, huh?’

‘What do you mean? If they know that, why would they keep doing it?’

Phil grimaced.

‘One of the many frustrations that you’ve got waiting for you in a couple of years.’

Peace frowned as that thought rattled around in her head. She walked up to one of the nearby shrubs and went in for a closer look.

‘Whoa, hold up there. You shouldn’t just go touching anything. That one happens to be fine, but pick the wrong one and you can go blind and all sorts of other fun stuff. This region has always been particularly good for that. Anyway, you can come in now if you like.’

When she entered the first room, Phil handed her a fleece jacket with a hood. It stuck to her sweaty arms and torso, but she was grateful before long. When they went into the next chamber, she felt the temperature plummet. After the final door opened, she zipped the jacket up.

There were shelves covering almost every inch of the bunker, towering far above her head. Each of the shelves was packed with jars of varying sizes stacked horizontally with labels on their lids. As she gazed down the rows she saw that each of the hundreds of labels was unique.

‘How many banks are there like this?’

‘I’ve got three going at the moment. There’s a larger one under the city for safekeeping, which is where Star does his part. He doesn’t do much with the seeds though. Just follows the occasional set of instructions from me to keep everything in order. Our Project is due to get two more banks next year and start expanding out to other Flagships after that.’

‘So, you can just cook up whatever you want in here?’

‘It’s still paid for by Flagship Tech, so all of the Projects have to be approved. Which at this point still means that they all have to be directly tied to a use for the Flagship. I get a few species under the wire by claiming them as ecosystem encouragers though,’ he said with a smile.

‘Why don’t you cut loose and start a bank of your own?’

‘Far too expensive. And even if I had the finances, it would be too hard to get access to the kind of stuff that I need. Only Flagship Tech can produce equipment like this now.’

Peace started wandering down the rows, reading all of the long names on the labels.

‘So the hope is that Star’s flying foxes will be able to keep spreading the seeds once they are all grown up?’

‘The flying foxes and the other long-range dispersers will, yes. Never good to put all of your eggs in one basket.’

‘Why did Star go for the Old World bats? Would the little ones die more easily out here?’

‘Maybe, but he didn’t really have much of a choice. Microbats live on blood and lizards and birds. They will have a go at nectar sometimes, but they don’t eat whole fruit like the megabats do. Not much good for our purposes. Plus, then he couldn’t have that damn tagline that he’s always pushing. If I see one more of those posters I’m likely to retreat out to The Ranges myself.’

Peace laughed. ‘I think it’s fantastic.’

‘Oh it’s a great poster. No denying that. It’s more Star’s aggressive peddling.’

‘That’s a part of the job that I’m not particularly looking forward to. Even Jenkins thinks I’m too prickly.’

‘I’ll tell you an industry secret: most of us don’t have to bother. You get one guy like your brother on a Project and you’re set.’

‘That’s a relief. How long will it be before you let the dispersers go, anyway?’

‘These seeds aren’t even ready for planting yet. Then they have to grow until they are of fruit-bearing age before there would be too much for any dispersers to eat out here. But I’m hoping that we’ll see them get planted within our lifetime.’

‘Is that soon enough?’

‘No point jumping the gun on something and ruining it before it’s begun.’

‘I suppose not. I just always imagined having a job like this would mean making real change.’

‘It will. It just won’t be for us.’

‘But that means that you’re going to die without knowing whether it was all worth it. Whether what you spent your entire life on came to fruition. What if they are just perished out here?’

‘There’s your brother talking. I wouldn’t be surprised if Star has some of the fruities flying by this time next year. A lot of them won’t last, of course, but if even a few do, I think he’ll feel all right about it.’

Peace continued to walk around the bank as Phil checked on some plants that were growing hydroponically in the lab.

‘Are you here all by yourself a lot of the time?’

‘No, no. There’s a team in each bank. They just don’t come out during Clouds.’

‘Do you run the show?’

‘Yup. We are pretty much all the same age. I just won out with my grades and pitch.’

‘Why isn’t there anybody older than you?’

‘I used to think about that before I came out here. A lot of them tend to transfer out of the sector into admin or come out and live in a satellite. I guess the pressure gets to them?’

When he was done, they went back down to Blue and drove to another site. For the final one, Peace decided to stay in the car. Blue had a triumphant grin on his face.

‘I read ‘em all.’

‘You mean you looked at the pictures,’ Peace goaded.

‘Wasn’t going to let words get in the way of a good story.’

Dot

He picked up his satchel and went to one of the department stores to choose a pack. After that, he went outside and rubbed the pack in the dirt and the grass. He went back in and began filling the pack with food, a couple of sets of clothes, and a packet of pencils. Then to the DIY section for a mini hatchet, lighter fluid and some rope. He rode his bike inside so that he could strap on a few containers of oil, coolant, and fresh water. Then it was down to the pet shop. He walked down the rows of set ups he'd rigged, his fingers brushing the glass. She was baking in the heat of a globe. The mice shrieked when they saw him and huddled in the corner of their cage. It was their day. He didn't want her feeling sluggish. He picked up the large hessian sack next to her tank.

The blue dot came to a stop on the phone. He reckoned that he had an hour before the egghead would finish up. Two before Peace got suspicious.

He rode out so that he was in view of the guard house and stopped for a moment. He looked up to enjoy the setting sun and could feel his captor's gaze burning down from the window behind him. Couldn't help but give a little wave.

When he had driven close enough to the spot, he walked his bike into the woods and kept an eye out for Blue's truck. Then he walked through the bush towards the dot on the phone. He picked up the sack, slid the hatchet into his belt, put the lighter fluid into his pocket, and hung the rope over his shoulder. He found the main door open. The security cameras were dozing in their perches. He walked in and grabbed a jacket, then gave a timid knock on the door as he shook the sack up. When the door opened, he threw her inside.

Sunset

‘Hi Seb.’

‘Phil?’

‘Never made it back after the meeting huh? Happens to the best of us. It’s a rough world out here.’

‘I’m so sorry Phil.’

‘Why?’

‘If he’s gotten to you, it’d be because of whatever I said.’

‘Not your fault. Nothing that you could have done.’

‘I should never have come out here.’

‘You had to at some point. Can’t go making decisions about the world when you’ve only seen a very small part of it.’

‘Jenkins seems to.’

‘Too right. Oh wow. Would you look at that?’

As Phil disappeared, Seb focussed out of the window again. The sun was setting, causing the particles to float through the air and take on its colour. Reflecting bright. Like every inch of the forest was in brilliant showers of flame.

Brown

‘He’s taking a hell of a long time in there.’

‘You know these sciencey types. Always looking for problems to get lost in.’

‘I think I’m going to go in and check.’

‘Won’t the door be locked?’

‘He said he’d leave the front one ajar so that I could come in and knock.’

‘What if he’s doing something secret?’

‘He didn’t mind me going in the other ones.’

‘Well, d’ya mind if I come with you? Don’t mean to be an old man, but there’s things out there that bite.’

‘Sure.’

He reached under his seat and pulled out a shotgun.

‘Seriously?’

‘You can never be too careful out here. I’d rather look like a nutter than end up someone’s dinner.’

‘There’re cannibals?’

‘Not talking about people. Although I wouldn’t put it past a few.’

Peace went around and got her knife. Blue nodded in approval and she wished it didn’t look so obviously like the first time that she had used it. When they got to the door, Blue pushed it open with the muzzle of the gun. Nothing looked any different in the first room. The jackets were hanging up on the side. Only one was missing. But she could feel a chill. The door to the next room was open. Shouldn’t be open. Wasn’t the sort of mistake that Phil would have made. She went to turn back but Blue was already pushing the internal door open further. The first thing that she noticed was a severed brown tail close to the entrance.

‘Don’t go near it,’ warned Blue, sticking his arm out. It can still bite.’

‘Phil?’ Peace called.

There was a thick smell in the air that Peace hadn’t noticed at the other banks. Liquid on the ground. Many of the jars had been opened or smashed. Hundreds of different types of seeds were scattered all over. Shapes. Sizes. Colours. She tried her best not to step on any of them as she walked. Her brain started panicking about how she would ever get them all back in their right jars before it registered that there was likely a much larger issue at hand.

They found Phil at the end of a row, tied up and limp with his eyes staring and blood pooling from the raw stump of his right arm.

‘Out!’ Blue barked.

The two of them began backing out of the bank. When Peace was standing near to the body of the king brown, it writhed around and she screamed. Blue turned and shot. The sparks from his shotgun hit the liquid on the ground and flames climbed the shelves in seconds. As they

ran out of the bank, Peace could hear the pops from the glass jars exploding inside. She kept running until she got to the truck, and then she collapsed on the bonnet.

‘Get up,’ Blue growled as he approached, ‘we need to get out of here.’

‘I don’t understand. I don’t, I don’t,—’

‘There’re any number of people out here that would pull a stunt like that against the Flagship, and I’m not waiting to find out who did. Up!’

‘Blood. His arm. The blood.’

‘Where can I take you? Where’s safe?’

‘So much blood.’

‘Back to the Flagship?’

‘Yes. No. I don’t know. Star. I want Star.’

‘Is that your brother? Where is he then?’

‘I don’t know!’ Peace said, clinging onto the bonnet.

‘Well, I’m sure as hell not staying here.’

Blue picked her up and shoved her into the truck. She fumbled to open up her backpack and pulled Echo out.

‘What happened? What’s going on?’

Peace clung onto his white plastic shell so hard that she heard it creak under the pressure.

‘Call Star. I’m sick of this.’

‘Peace, I’ve tried. Of course I’ve been trying. The whole time.’

‘Well try again!’

‘Peace, I’ve been thinking,’ Echo said. ‘What if it isn’t Star?’

‘What do you mean *not Star*?’

‘What if somebody got a hold of his phone?’

‘That’s stupid. I don’t need this right now, Echo. I don’t need that. He’d deactivate it so that they couldn’t contact anybody or anything. Star wouldn’t let this happen to me.’

‘What if he can’t deactivate it? What if he can’t stop anything?’

‘What are you saying Echo?’

Blue gunned the truck and sped down the road, causing dust to kick up all around the sides. It was harder than ever to see.

‘Where are you going?’ Peace asked.

‘Those folk in Newtown wouldn’t know the first thing about keeping you safe.’

‘From what?’

‘I’m taking you to Boundary. You can lie low there and wait for your brother. Boundary might have grown up a lot, but you can still disappear there.’

‘I was told that I shouldn’t go there.’

‘Miss, trust me on this one. There’s nowhere safer out here. Just keep your head down and don’t tell anybody your name. Get a room somewhere and stay there. You’ll be fine.’

‘Wait.’

‘What?’

‘His hand. Whoever was in there. They took his hand.’

‘So?’ Blue launched over a pothole and slowed down a bit.

‘We have to go back to the other banks.’

‘Are you kidding?’

‘They’re part of my brother’s work. It’s important to him.’

‘So are you, I wouldn’t mind betting.’

‘We can call somebody.’

‘There isn’t anybody out here to call. Nobody that would help you do much of anything, let alone against someone as crazy as that.’

‘Turn around the car. We need to go back.’

‘I’m not going back for some seeds, damn it. If they’re gone, they’re gone. Nothing we can do about it.’

‘But you have a gun.’

‘When a man gets an idea in his head, it can make him a lot stronger than a weapon.’

‘Man? Blue. Stop the car. Do you know who did this? You do, don’t you? You know who did it!’

‘I don’t, Miss Kelly.’

‘You do. Blue, what if he’s done something to my brother. Please. Turn around. I need to know.’

‘He wouldn’t be there Miss Kelly. I’m betting all that would be left is smoking wreckage like the other one. No. There’s nothing there for you. I’ll get you to Boundary. You’ll be safe there, I swear it. I’d bring my own children there right now. I promise you I would.’

‘My brother could be lying there bleeding out like Phil. Tell me what you know. Tell me what you know about the man that killed Phil. About the man that could have Star.’

‘What I know? If he’s dead then he’s dead and you’ll just have to keep on living like everybody else does. You’re out in the wild now. There might not be much wilderness left to it, but there’s wildness in hearts. Forget your brother. Get yourself home.’

‘And give up on him?’

‘Unless you’ve got a mind to get yourself killed.’

‘Stop the car. I’m getting out. STOP.’

She jumped for the steering wheel. Blue stopped abruptly. She hit her head on the dashboard and everything went dark. When she came to, she was lashed to the seat with the rope from her pack. Blue was driving again. She tried struggling for a moment, but it just cut off the circulation to her hands. She faded out.

When she woke up, Peace could see a tall structure on the horizon. It wasn't much at first. Just a solid line through the haze. She wondered whether it might just be a trick of the light.

'I'm going to let you go now. What you do is your choice. There's Boundary, up ahead. The Flagship is a few days walk that way. I'm happy to drive you there too, if you'd rather. I'm sorry things turned out like this. I really am.'

'I just want to get out of this truck.'

Blue put Peace's belongings on the road before he untied her. She left the rope in the truck, grabbed her stuff, and marched towards the gates.

'We need to call Jenkins, Peace. This just got too big for us to handle,' came Echo's voice from her backpack.

'Don't you dare. I'm going to find Star. If you call Jenkins he'll take us back to the Flagship and I'll never see Star again.'

With every step that she took towards the gates, she felt herself wanting to turn around and flee back to the Flagship. She didn't care about the plantations or things that she might not have been told. She wanted to go straight to the Jenkins' house and have the Director just hug her and keep quiet for a while like he would. Just close her eyes. Stop getting lost in thought. She wouldn't even want to ask the questions that had been occurring to her all day if she could have that. Felt like she would never ask them again. But as she thought about that moment, two figures came out from a hole in the base of the wall that was now looming above her. A voice blared out of a speaker from the top of it and kept looping.

'Put down belongings and submit to the search. Refusal will be taken as hostile intent.'

Fresh Shirt

He was waiting by the side of the road when Blue turned up. Blue came out with his shotgun.

‘That was a dirty trick. You could have had me killed,’ Blue roared.

He smiled and gestured down to the canisters at his feet.

‘I don’t care how much you’ve brought me. Don’t put me in a spot like that again. And I’m not having anything more to do with that girl neither. It’s not right.’

He walked back over to his bike. Blue started picking up the canisters and loading them into his truck. Swing, swing, swing went the watch-arm.

‘You can’t get around like this and expect no one to get you back for it. I like you kid, so you listen up. If you’ve got her brother, you want to hope that you kill that boy or he’s going to be hunting you down.’

He paid no mind, changing into a fresh shirt. He stuffed the old one deep into his pack.

‘She’s back in Newtown. It’s done now. You leave her be. Going after seeds is one thing, but chasing down kids is another. I didn’t say a word when you needed help with that other lot. Can’t say that they didn’t have it comin’. But I can’t imagine that a child could have dealt anything close to the damage that you’re putting her through.’

He took off in the direction of Newtown to soothe the old man’s mind. Doubled back. Took out the phone. Zoomed in. The little dot was moving, but not far. She’d found a new home.

Moon

He'd never seen the moon in a Cloud. Things had always wound up by the evening. It had risen as a red, defined circle, just as the sun had done. It reminded him of a time when he and a couple of mates from uni had stayed up all night during the last lunar eclipse to see the blood moon. How they'd raced up to the roof to get the best look. This time in the room had made months seem like years. Seb wondered whether his friends were gathered together for this one. Something told him no. He wondered if they could see the dull illumination across the whole sky, or if that part was just for him. Hell, he was open to the possibility that it was all just for him. There was sense of some mercy in that.

The Creep had been gone a long time now. Every few minutes Sebastian would switch in his thinking. Whether it was better to have him there and the pain that brought, or to have him away and not know what he was doing. Seb had stopped trying to move. He'd even stopped worrying about the hallucinations. He'd stopped wondering how long it would be until he could sweat it out, and started wondering how many more shots had to race along the tube until his body just gave out. He'd given up on rescue, too. If the Flagship were coming, they would have come days ago. That was the right decision, he kept telling himself. No point putting several people in danger to save just one. At least when he looked around it almost seemed like his bats were present for the event. He thought of the few who had gone missing. All Upper Management. If The Creep had meant to go for a scientist, why not somebody more established? Then it came together. The seed banks had just been a bonus. Everybody makes mistakes. The Creep had bet on the wrong horse. On the wrong Kelly.

The Gardener

As they got closer, Peace saw that the two men were in gasmasks. There were black discs where there should have been eyes. One of them took her packs and began rifling through them. The other one patted her down. She kept trying to make her mind blank, but all she could see was the way that the bone had been protruding out of Phil's ragged flesh. When the guard checking her backed off, she looked over at her belongings. The knife would be gone. That was just something that she'd have to accept.

They had Echo and Sunseeker directly on the dirt. She hoped that they weren't getting too much grit in their joints. The guards seemed to be keeping the bots aside. Peace figured that they might have to do some sort of screening. With the bots still out, they roughly packed everything back in and pushed the packs at Peace.

'You're good to go.'

'What about those two?'

'Boundary doesn't allow Flagship Tech,' they said, offering her a token. 'You can stay out here with them or leave them at the gate.'

Peace looked around at the dark trees. As they swayed they took on all sorts of shapes. She thought about the tent in her pack for a moment, but her mind kept sketching in details between the trees. She hesitantly took the token. It was orange with the number 17, like she was leaving something in a locker at a swimming pool. Peace slowly walked up to the gate.

‘Move it, missy,’ one of the guards barked, jostling her forward.

When Peace got to the opening in the gate, she looked up and noticed that the wall wasn’t made of a solid material. It was like a decoupage with bits and pieces of scrap metal covered in pictures. A lot of them looked familiar, and as she was shoved forward she realized that they were sections of advertisements that she’d seen ever since she was a little girl. Cereals, movies, phones – it was all there. Peace felt the warm assurance that those ads had brought her through her childhood. Every purchase a contribution to not only the solidarity of the Flagship, but to that of the Surrounds and the entire planet. But the way that the ads were fragmented didn’t make them seem like the wholesome things they once were. The smiling faces and taglines were all cut up and layered over each other and it made her feel sick, as if the walls were decorated with human heads on pikes. She looked to the side as one of the guards took Echo and Sunseeker into a shed. There was a long stretch before what looked like another gate, and to either side the curve of the wall was lost in the Cloud, making it impossible to guess at the size of the place. Peace trekked up to the next gate. It opened into a corridor with a desk at the end of it.

Just as in Newtown, a stout woman was stationed behind the desk, but she wasn’t the soft and cuddly type. This woman was as broad and muscular as an ogre. Peace tried not to stare, but she’d never seen somebody like that in her life. She found herself wondering whether there might be more strict criteria for being allowed inside Flagship walls than she’d previously considered.

When Peace got to the desk, she waited. For a moment she wondered whether the woman had heard her, but her boots had rung out with each step down the long metal hall. When she finished the page that she was working on, the woman looked up.

‘You need anything?’

‘No. Not that I know of.’

‘Then go through.’

‘I don’t need to sign in or anything?’

‘This isn’t Newtown sweetie.’

Peace thought for a moment.

‘Actually, could you let me know somewhere where I can stay for the night? This is my first time to a Boundary.’

‘No kidding.’

The woman put down her sheets of paper and looked over the desk at Peace.

‘How old are you?’

‘Fourteen.’

She gave a short, sharp laugh.

‘What?’

‘Well aren’t you in the deep end? We don’t get many your age in here.’

‘I just need to stay for the night.’

‘Well, there’s a few options, but I don’t know about a good deal of them considering your...demographic.’

Fearsome faces loomed in Peace's mind.

'We have a youth hall for under 20s. It's no walk in the park, but you might do better there than at some of the other places.'

'That sounds good,' Peace responded quickly.

The woman took a small map from the pile on her desk and circled a street. On the back was a flyer for a long-gone sale day in the Flagship.

'You want to head along here until you get to the third street on your right. All the way to the end of that one, and then take a left. Second right, then halfway down that street and you're there.'

'Thank you.'

'If you don't mind me asking, why'd you come out here? You look a little young to be jaded by the Flagship.'

'None of your business.'

The woman smiled.

'Good girl. You'll be just fine. Welcome to Boundary comrade. I hope you find what you're looking for.'

Peace took the map.

'Most people will probably be indoors, but they are pretty irritable today. More than usual that is.'

‘OK. Thanks.’

The year before, Peace had written an assignment on Boundary. Each student in her grade had had to pretend that they were representatives of the Flagship and address a problem that they took out of a hat. Most of the problems were fairly similar. Different aggressive attempts to breach the Flagship. Take over resources and whatnot. But Peace had drawn out something different. She had to make a case to present to the citizens of Boundary. Ask them to come into the fold. She’d read up on their primitive ways. Exposure to the elements. Poor nutrition. But when she stepped out of the door, everything that Peace thought she knew got wiped.

The height of the structures was hard to tell on account of the Cloud, but the lights on the towers twinkled all the way up through the haze until they looked like stars. The buildings seemed to stretch much higher up into the sky than the malls of the Flagship. Everything was made in the style of the wall out front. Fragments of eyes, teeth, words, shoes, food, antennas, and all manner of other things were squashed together into a grotesque form. There were winding little alleys going everywhere, but the Cloud distorted anything that was more than ten metres away. Peace got out her map, and then swiftly wished she hadn’t. Should have memorised it and set off the second that she got out of the door. Too late now.

Crooked figures began appearing through the black. Some of them were limping. Others had crutches. A couple had been sewn off from the torso down, pulling themselves along on boards with wheels. Some were old and grey, but too many of them seemed to be her father’s age or even younger. One of the guys on a board looked about the same age as Star.

‘Have you got anything that could help us out love?’

She didn't feel scared, but just the sight of their missing limbs and hands and feet and eyes made her sick. She tried to think of what to say. The only people who had been in wheelchairs in the Flagship were those who had gotten too old. She remembered people with disabilities in books, but as far as she knew the world had moved past that particular issue.

'What happened to all of you?'

'Fresh out of the Flagship, eh?' responded one of the older ones with a zigzag spine who was heavily relying on a walking stick. 'Factory accidents mostly. Some of us were born like this or had other things happen.'

'Boundary has factories?'

'No. The Flagship factories.'

Her clothes felt tight around her.

'No other sort that we know of or we would have searched for work there.'

'If you worked for the Flagship, why aren't you there now? Getting proper care? Do you choose to be out here?'

They all started laughing and suddenly she felt very cold. Like they deserved it.

'In a way we make a choice,' slurred a woman with a face that sagged on one side.

'Put it this way, darl,' said a man with one eye socket sunken in and a burn that trailed down beneath his filthy clothes. 'Have you ever seen anybody like us in there?'

'I guess not.'

‘Well, when you can’t work, you can’t buy. Way they see it, they don’t need anybody who drains the system. So out we go.’

‘But you said there was a choice?’

‘A choice between out here and the goodnight needle perhaps.’

She put her pack on the ground and got out all of her soup cans.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Not your fault honey. But we aren’t exactly going to say no to a feed.’

The group started opening the cans the moment that she handed them to them, taking swigs of the cold, chunky mixture before handing it around. The brown liquid dripped down their chins. A part of her wanted to ask more, but the sight of the jagged stitches and purple stumps was too much. She made a mental note to talk to Jenkins when she returned, then felt like she was about five years old and wishing on stars. She continued down the road.

Every now and then, faces would look down at her from their houses. She saw a whole string of scenes in the first-level windows. In the same way that she had found it difficult to see those in Newtown as the same as she was, the people of Boundary seemed a step that much further away. But seeing parents eating with their children, attending to things in their houses, and even just sitting in conversation pointed to stark similarities. She imagined what it would be like for those from Boundary or Newtown to walk the streets of a Flagship and try to understand how they could possibly be the same animal.

When she’d taken the first turn, she saw another group approaching her.

‘I don’t have anything left,’ she said without turning to face them.

‘Are you new to town, dear?’

The friendly tones make her stop.

‘I’m sorry, I’m just on my way somewhere.’

‘That’s all right, we’ll only take a moment of your time. Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘I’m really all right, thank you. I just want to get to where I’m going.’

‘We just want to know if you’ve heard about the good work of The Farmer.’

Run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Some call him The Gardener, as he’s plucking out the weeds. But we here prefer to think of The Farmer as one who will sow new seeds when it is time.’

‘What is his work?’ Peace asked, thinking of the devil’s twine.

‘He brings us the Clouds. They aren’t something to fear, you know. They mean that The Farmer is tilling the field.’

Peace looked along the street and noticed that everybody was in their Sunday best. There were women in big hats talking on footpaths, men sitting on mismatched seats hunched over games on tables, and children darting all through them playing tag. She watched them running around in their suspenders and dresses with big bows, and could only think of their little lungs. None of them was wearing masks or goggles.

‘Shouldn’t you all be inside?’

‘The Clouds won’t bring us any harm. You neither, young lady. There’s no need to hide yourself away. No need to be scared.’

‘What do you mean the Clouds are from him?’

‘You are fresh out of the Flagship, aren’t you, dear? Most of the people who work in the factories live out there, but you find a few dotted about. Ones who have retired. Ones who wanted to start a family. In fact, one of our own congregation used to work at one of the factories nearby here. I can fetch him if you’d like?’

‘Maybe it’s because you don’t have contacts down south, but that’s not where the Clouds come from. I know for a fact that the Clouds are from the fires they get down there. The ones that swallow whole towns overnight. That’s why we can predict the Clouds and sometimes cloud seed enough to bring the rain and settle them.’

‘I’m afraid not, dear. They are the filth of a wasteful society.’

‘In a way, sure. They’re there because of how thoughtless and wasteful people before the PNR changed the world. Made it warm.’

‘I’m not talking about that, love. I’m talking about the Flagship.’

‘I can understand why you’d think that if you’ve never been in there, but the whole thing runs on renewables and recycling. Well...I suppose there are a lot of trees in those plantations. But still, we don’t emit anything like what Boundary would.’

Peace felt her cheeks getting hot.

‘I’m afraid that’d just not true. Does it look like we have huge power plants and factories pumping things out for us? Boundary folk are scavengers, dear. Feeding off the carrion left behind by the beast that is the Flagship.’

‘Let’s say that you’re right for a moment. That the Flagship really does pollute enough to cause these Clouds. Then why wouldn’t they be around all of the time huh? That doesn’t make sense.’

‘The Flagship stores it underground. The Farmer only lets it come out where all can see.’

‘I’m sorry, but I need to be somewhere.’

‘That’s your choice, dear. You are free to return when you change your mind.’

Growing up with Birch and Wattle, there was only one thing that made Peace truly furious: when people wouldn’t listen to reason. She wasn’t thinking about Phil or about dangers or anything else. Her mind was just running over the conversation with the woman in a tight loop until she felt like her brains would splatter all over the dust beneath her boots.

Peace decided to keep her head down for the rest of the walk, and to only look up to check the street names and numbers. In the back of her mind she had the nagging sensation that she didn’t have any way to truly prove what she was saying, and just that it was something that everybody should accept. There were some things that didn’t need proving or discussion, but it was still uncomfortable to not be able to defend those ideas properly. She didn’t like walking away from a conversation when somebody was so misinformed. Especially when they had their children there dancing around in smoke that would make their lungs give out by the time that

they were twelve. But if she'd stayed there a second longer she felt like she might have boxed somebody in the face.

In the corners of her vision, everything looked brown, red, and dark. Peace heard cackling laughter in the distance. There were piles of filth all over the street, and it sloshed up around her boots. She looked up at a street number and saw that she was close. There was a sign a little further down, and she barrelled down the street. She didn't know if it was the anger or the Cloud or fear or Phil, but she felt like her brain was all swollen up and pushing against her skull. Her ears, nose, and throat were all tender from the pressure in her head, and all she wanted was to find somewhere to crawl into a corner and just sleep.

She checked the number and saw that it was just a few buildings down.

'Nearly there, Echo,' she said, before remembering.

Then, as she turned and head up the stairs, she powered straight into a clean, pressed shirt.

Buzzing

There she was, sprawled out on the street with a pack twice her size trying to get up. For a moment, all he could do was stare at her. He reached out his hand and helped her up.

‘Thank you. I’m sorry. I just really want to get inside.’

And for the first time in years, he found himself trying to respond. A buzzing sensation in his throat. Natural and involuntary as it might have been before. He wasn’t even sure what he’d been intending to say.

‘Hello?’ Peace tested as he stared off into the distance. ‘All right, I’m heading in.’

He nodded and she struggled up the stairs. She belted on the door and somebody appeared on the other side of it. The staff member went back to the check-in desk, but she remained on the threshold.

‘You coming?’

He walked through and stood behind her as she booked herself in. The staff member at the desk charged her far too much so that the guy could get his hands on her Flagship dollars. He’d be paying with cigarettes himself, and he had the exact amount he’d need counted out in the box.

Peace seemed to glow as she went down the hall. So pale, like all Flagshippers, but what else is to be expected when you’re never allowed outside to play.

Ants

Nobody was visiting anymore. There was only nausea. The sensation that every time he took a breath, his body would get overwhelmed and that would be it. But he kept getting through them. One at a time. Slow. Measured. Breaths.

Seb tried to occupy himself with the past, because that was looking a hell of a lot brighter than the future. He remembered the one time that he had really made Birch angry, when he was crushing ants on the footpath with other neighbourhood boys. Seb had never seen Birch's eyes like that, and had wondered whether Birch would actually hit him. That day had sent Birch into a spiral from which their relationship never really recovered. Seb was sure that's how Birch still thought of him now. As a boy playing God.

He wished that he could tell Birch why now. Not that it would have made much of a difference. He'd heard in school that ants could lift ten times their body weight, and he was trying to figure out just how much that was.

Another shot down the tube. He had gotten to the point where he was using the shots to measure time. Didn't like that. He got used to things too quickly, but that is a fault of the species. It must have done us well at times, he thought. Adjusting to new places. New groups. Births, deaths, additions, subtractions. But at the end of the day it seemed to make everything lose its sheen too quickly. Make that attained goal seem like just one step on the way. Make a person something that will always be around. And make the gift of a day, of getting to be alive, just blend in with all of the others.

Scar

The hall was full of people a few years older than her. Most of them guys. They sat sprawled over their belongings, chests puffed out, and more than a few of them with knives and other implements on display. When they caught sight of her they all began to clap.

‘Three cheers!’ they yelled, then sounded some short, booming blasts.

Peace made eye contact with a few of them and did some meek nodding. She wrapped her hands around her smaller backpack and the way that it folded from its emptiness made her throat stick. She set her sights on the back and began the long walk. A lot of them were drinking a sharp-smelling golden liquid.

Peace scouted the room for someone that looked a bit smaller, or at least a bit quieter, and saw the guy that she’d steamed into on her way in. Somehow he was already at the back, having circumvented all of the hoo-rah. Thinking back on what everybody had said, she decided it wouldn’t be good to pose as a loner. That might invite questions. Interrogations, more likely. And she was certainly in no mood to deal with the big lugs around her. She figured that if she was sitting close enough to somebody else, they might be mistaken for travel companions.

He had set up a sleeping mat on the ground, and was lounging on his pack reading a book. Peace walked down to his end of the hall, and set up a few metres down. Close enough to look together. Far enough not to crowd him. After a while, she found herself hoping that he’d look up from his book, just an acknowledgement, but he was engrossed in some volume about triffids.

Her stomach cramped and she wished that she hadn't gotten so emotional and given away all of her soup cans. She went through the bag and found some packets of dry crackers. As she opened the first packet, it made a loud, rustling sound. He still hadn't looked up from his book. The way he was sitting made her think about her own posture. It was like a quiet power. The only other person she'd met like that was the Director himself, but this was different again. It wasn't that he looked like a leader. More that he'd seen things and knew what the world was like. There was something else, too, something that she hadn't ever really thought about before. His skin was darker than anybody she'd ever met. It wasn't as if she didn't know about the way that other people could look, but it was very different having somebody right in front of her. She'd seen people from all parts of the world before the PNR in her social studies books, but there wasn't a huge variation of people in the Flagship. There were lots of very rich families from the wasteland that they used to call China, and she'd heard a lot of rumours about how much entry into the Flagships had cost them. But there was certainly nobody like him. She looked around at the fresh, pink-white faces in the rest of the hall and guessed that a lot of them had probably only come out the same day as her. Or from the last Cloud at a stretch, clinging onto the feeling of when they first got out. Mentors for new recruits.

'Sorry to bother you, but do you know if there's a shower or something around here?'

He looked over his book and gave a smirk, nodding his head over to the corner where there was a bucket set up with a curtain.

'Really? I hope that the bathroom is a different situation.'

He motioned to a different bucket with a curtain at the other end of the hall.

'Oh.'

He put his book down and got a notepad out of his pack. He started writing and she wondered whether he was indicating for her to let him be until he handed her the book when he was done. The page was old and tattered, and she could see hints of the other things that he'd erased.

Fresh out of the Flagship then?

She picked up the pencil that was tucked in the side and wrote back.

Is it that obvious? Why are we writing? Are you worried that people will listen in?

He smiled and put his novel to the side.

With a necklace like that, you'd have to be. And you can talk. I just can't.

She looked up and he tapped his throat. It was hard to see in the dim light, but when he stretched his neck forward she saw a thick, jagged scar running down it.

'Was that a factory accident?'

No. How's that little thing grow in there?

'The moss? It's its own ecosystem. Aside from a couple of drops of water now and then, it looks after itself.'

Can I see it?

Peace grabbed the terrarium defensively, but it seemed rude not to pass it over. She unhooked and offered it with shaking hands. He looked into it so closely that Peace wondered

whether there was a glaring feature that she hadn't noticed. She thought that she saw a sadness in his expression, but then he smirked.

'What?'

Nothing. What's your name?

He leant over and put it back around her neck.

'Peace,' she said automatically.

What kind of a name is that?

She looked up and threw his notebook back at him. She didn't feel so stupid anymore. She reminded herself that she should be more cautious with other people, but for now she was glad to have somebody to talk to just so that she could stop thinking.

'My parents are weirdos. I just haven't got around to changing it yet. My brother changed his.'

Better than mine. I'm at the other end of the spectrum.

'What? John? Daniel?'

Will.

'You're right, pretty forgettable.'

He started writing.

They say that there's a lot behind a name. Maybe you wouldn't be who you are if you didn't have it.

‘Yeah, try living with it though.’

If you want to change it, there’s no time like the present. Nobody’s got the first clue about you out here. Fewer still care.

She thought of Phil and desperately tried to grasp at something else to talk about.

You look like you’ve had a rough day, and those crackers don’t look very appetising. Want something a little more substantial?

She pretended to be reading over it a couple of times as she fought between a definite yes and how stupid it was to accept food from someone she’d just met.

He opened up his bag and took his notebook back before she had responded.

It’s OK. It’s packaged. You’re right to be cautious though. Smart.

He took out a couple of things. Jerky. Dried fruit. Bottles of juice.

‘Where did you get all of this stuff?’

I know a place.

‘Do you want to trade for something? I’ve got some stuff from home.’

Don’t worry about it. Think of it as a welcome basket.

She opened the jerky. She didn’t want to eat it too quickly in case she made herself sick. She offered him the packet.

All good. I’ve already eaten and I’m heading home tomorrow.

She took a larger piece and didn't savour it so long, then popped open one of the juices.

'Are you from this sub?'

Born and raised. What are you doing out here? You're a fair way out from the nearest Flagship.

The day caught up with her. She knew that she shouldn't, but she just wanted to talk. There was something about him not being able to respond right away. Some sort of trust, or at least something genuine. Like he was really thinking about everything that she said.

'I'm looking for my brother.'

Did he head out here some time ago?

'I don't know.'

Where have you looked?

'I went to Newtown. We had a meet up organized. I think we did. I don't know anymore.'

Did you come here to look, too?

She looked around at the rest of the hall.

'I really can't see him coming to a place like this. I just came for somewhere to stay for the night.'

I know this sub pretty well. What kind of place could you imagine him in?

'I really don't know. I don't know why he would have even asked me.'

Asked you what?

‘To come out here. I never should have left. Maybe I should just go back to the Flagship tomorrow and try to make something up about getting kidnapped or something.’

I could take you back home if you want? In the morning.

‘How?’

I have a bike. Safer than walking and a hell of a lot quicker.

Peace sat there chewing on more jerky as she thought.

‘I’ve come so far already though.’

No point keeping at something that isn’t working just because you started.

‘That’s true. But what if something has happened to him? It’s so out of character. If he never came home, I would always feel like I could have done more.’

We could look for him if you like?

‘But where?’

There’s a few places we could try.

‘In this Cloud?’

It’ll take a lot less time to check a few places on the bike than it would for you to walk back to the Flagship. It’s less exposure to the Cloud either way. If we don’t find him, I can get you back before nightfall.

She thought for a moment.

‘When could we go?’

Early morning would be best.

‘What do we do until then?’

I’d suggest sleep.

She looked into his eyes. It was almost as if she could hear the voices of everybody she’d ever known telling her how stupid the idea was, but it felt like her best bet. The Flagship was so far away, and her chest already felt heavy, like a snake was slowly contracting around her.

‘OK.’

Peace went over to her mat and pack and pulled them closer to where he had set up. She thought that she heard a few calls from the boys at the front, but she didn’t care. Will had set himself up with his book again, and without even looking down he reached to his side and took hold of her hand. It felt strange at first. She hadn’t done that with anybody since she was about six years old. But it didn’t feel sleazy either, like all of the things that their teachers had warned them about in PE class. It just felt like understanding. As he kept reading, he ran his thumb over her knuckles, and before long, Peace was in a deep sleep.

Gympie-Gympie

After everybody in the hall had sedated themselves, Will shook her awake. They packed their things and walked out into the street. She guessed that the sun was starting to rise, but it was hard to tell. When she tried to hand in her token, the guards informed her that there was nothing in the locker. Peace looked up at Will and had the good sense to keep quiet. He shepherded her outside.

‘I need those bots,’ she pleaded.

He nodded. He got a new pack of gardening gloves out of his bag, and left her at his bike while he looked through the forest. It only took him a few minutes to find what he was after. He plucked a few of the heart-shaped leaves. When he got back to the bike, she handed him his notebook with a question mark on the page. *Gympie-gympie*, he wrote and gave her a wink.

There were two guards stationed on that side of the wall. They frisked him and didn’t bother paying any attention to the leaves in his gloved hand. One stayed at the gate while the other retreated to the guardhouse. Will tailed after him. Inside the guardhouse, Will sneaked up behind the guard and clamped some of the leaves over his mouth. The guard’s mouth shot open from the sting. Will jammed the leaves in and muffled his scream. The stinging hairs worked their way into the guard’s throat tissue, and he started choking as his neck swelled. When the guard collapsed, Will looked around for a bag. He took the knife from the guard’s belt and cut a section from the guard’s bulging stomach. Will wrapped the meat in layers of plastic bags that had been scavenged from some trash heap, and put the bundle in the bag. Then he walked over to a large metal trunk behind the desk and opened it. Two timid bots blinked up at him.

Bird

The forest looked black now. Charred after the fiery sunset. As the sun began to rise, he started to notice movement. Morning routines. Life. Winged colours streaked past the window. Insects came to the glass. The more the sun rose, the more there were tremors in the shrubs and leaves. It felt like waking up for the first time in his life.

Now that he could see properly, Seb spotted his favourite. He'd never seen one in real life before, and hoped that he would get a chance to go down and take a proper look. Ever since he'd first heard about them in school he'd dreamed about seeing a real strangler fig. He was fascinated by the way that the fig depended on the host for most of its life, then in flourishing killed the host and itself in turn. The figs were everywhere. Withering homage to the trees trapped within. He marvelled at how the weak little things stretched out along the powerful limbs. Laced through the roots. Made a skeleton out of the healthy, majestic specimen. The plant and animal kingdom had been manipulating each other a long time before man came along.

One of the flashes of colour perched on the rail outside of his window. A yellow chest with grey along its head and back. It was looking in through the glass. Probably at itself. But it was the first thing that Seb had looked in the eyes for days. He feared trying to talk in case he could. In case it disappeared like everything else. That even this little thing might be a part of the great charade. His mind filling in the blanks. But when he tried, nothing came out. Seb smiled as he watched the bird skip about on the railing, trying to figure out what it was looking at.

Eventually, it lost interest and flew away.

Chip

‘Echo? Are you all right?’

‘What’s going on? Who is that?’

‘Excuse me, but I don’t seem to have a chip. I really think that I should have one. Are you able to help me?’

‘Echo! I asked you not to waste—’

Their conversation got cut off as Will started up his bike. Peace wrapped her arms around his torso and buried her face in his jacket. Just like Blue, he didn’t seem to have trouble seeing through the Cloud. He roared along the road. Peace heard a few shots from behind her and then a couple of sounds that whizzed ahead, narrowly missing them. She shut her eyes tight and tried not to breathe too deeply, but every shallow breath that she took made her lungs more and more hungry. Peace had always viewed cars and bikes as needless and destructive, but there was something about tearing along a road at that speed. Something that she was sure her parents had always wanted her to get from meditation, but which had never happened for her. For the first time in her life, Peace had found a place in her mind that could just be quiet.

Before long, she felt the bike slowing down.

‘Why are we stopping?’

He pointed to a shack ahead that looked like it should have been the victim of one of the big tropical storms that they got here and there. The paint was peeling off every surface of the

shack like flaking skin, and most of the roof shingles littered the tufts of weeds that sprouted around the building's foundations. Will stashed the bike around the side. When he opened the door, Peace was hit with an awful sensation. As much as Peace tried to knock down all of her parents' nonsense, sometimes irrational seeds still sprouted in her mind. When she crossed the threshold into the shack, it was like she had gone over some sort of barrier. She hadn't passed through any cobwebs, and there was no cold chill, but the air seemed thicker when she went into that place. Her heart was beating hard and her limbs had gone cold. It boiled down to the feeling that something bad had happened there. Or was going to happen. Maybe both. But she didn't want to be a stupid kid spooked by the dark.

Will had gotten out a torch and was writing in his notebook.

I just need to stop in on an old friend. You can stay here if you like. I'll be back soon.

'What do you mean? Does somebody live here?'

Down by the river.

The feeling of the room was heavy on every inch of her skin. Pressing.

'I'll come with.'

He put his notebook away and left his satchel on the floor, motioning for Peace to put her things down as well. He turned off the torch. She couldn't see a thing, but she felt him take her hand and guide her towards the door. He didn't seem to have any trouble walking through the dark either. His hands were a lot rougher than those of people in the Flagship. Little scars and calluses. Each one making her realize how little she knew about him. She felt him flick his wrist.

'I'll be back, Echo.'

‘While you’re out, could you track me down a chip?’ Sunseeker requested.

‘And for goodness sake, shut Sun down,’ Peace said as she left the shack.

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When Peace and Will were out of earshot, Echo started working on the zip of the backpack.

‘What are you doing?’ Sunseeker asked.

‘I’m getting you a chip.’

‘Oh wonderful!’

‘Yeah. Hey, hold this side of the bag down would you? It’ll be a lot quicker if you do.’

‘Who’s chip is it?’

‘I don’t know. We’re going to find out.’

‘We aren’t stealing somebody’s chip are we? That is identity theft. I could find out things that I’m not meant to know. I can get shut down for that. You too.’

‘Do you want the chip or not?’ Eco asked bluntly.

A pause.

‘Yes. I want it.’

‘Then hold down that side.’

Once Echo got his hand out, it was easier to push the zip across. He boosted over to the other bags, and adjusted the brightness on his screen so that he could see. Thankfully, the latch to the satchel was unlocked. He opened the bag as Sunseeker landed beside him. She saw the phone.

‘I’m going to have to shut you down while I insert this,’ Echo said cautiously.

‘I know. It’s OK. I’ll wake up soon. Like I should.’

‘Maybe more than you think.’

Echo powered her down, then picked up a pencil from the satchel and poked the imbedded button on the side of Sunseeker’s head to release the compartment for the chip. It slid out and Echo could see right inside.

‘Lights on but nobody home,’ he said to himself.

Next, Echo scouted the ground for a piece of thin metal. There were a few scraps around, and he tried a couple before he found one that would fit into the hole on the side of the phone. The tray popped open, and the chip sprang out. He dropped the chip a few times before he got it settled in the compartment, his fingers not made for such dexterous movements. Finally, Echo pushed the chip into Sunseeker’s tray and booted her up.

After she’d loaded, there were a few moments when she did nothing. Then she started screaming.

‘What is it?’

‘Echo?’

‘It’s me.’

‘What have I done?!’

‘You haven’t been in there for a while Sun, you’re just catching up. Whatever it is, you didn’t do any of it. Your chip has been in a phone for the last few years.’

‘What have I done?’

Echo looked towards the door, hoping that Peace and Will were too far away to hear Sun’s screeching.

‘Sun. You need to slow down. You need to tell me from the start.’

She had curled into a ball and her head was twitching.

‘Do you want me to take it out?’

‘No! No, please. I just...’

‘What?’

‘I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.’

She started smashing her head against the floor.

‘Stop it! I don’t know what’s happening in there but I need to.’

Sunseeker got stuck on a nail poking out of one of the floorboards and tore a savage gash in the plastic on her face.

‘Echo! You need to help.’

‘I will. I promise.’

‘He can’t know. He’ll kill Peace. He can’t know. And the Director. What have I done?!’

‘Sun, I don’t understand. Go from the start. Go from the last time that we got a message from Star. Really from Star.’

She tried to think but ended up with her head twitching and hitting the floorboards again.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I’m all mixed up.’

‘It’s OK. Just send it to me. All of it.’

Meat

The second that the river came into view, Will could feel her watching them.

‘Who’s—’

He put up a hand to keep Peace quiet. Motioned for her to stay on the hill. He walked down the hill slowly. He could see her now. Just her eyes and the tip of her nose. He stayed a fair distance back from the water as he took the chunk of meat out and unwrapped the plastic. He launched it into the river and she surfaced, clamping her jaws on the morsel when it was still mid air, and then dragged it down. He knew that he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t help standing there for a few moments more. He was sure that she’d recognise him by now. She came back up, her whole head out this time, the water lapping over the length of her. She floated there, just watching. He slowly walked backwards, still facing the river. When he got to the top of the hill, Peace was stepping from side-to-side like a six-year-old who’d just seen a unicorn.

‘I didn’t know that we still had creatures that large.’

He nodded and wished that he could have said more.

‘How long have you been feeding it?’

Two fingers and stretched arms.

‘Two years? That’s amazing. So what, you’ve tamed it?’

He shook his head gladly.

Bubble

There was full light on the forest now. Seb had dreamed of going out into a rainforest like that for years. He suspected that some of the punishment, or whatever it was, was being on the other side of the glass from that wonder, mute and lame. Like he could never be a part of it.

Some hazy memories started returning. Things that he might have said to The Creep. The seed banks. The dispersers.

Seb looked up at the bag. It was about a third empty. He had stopped waiting for death now. If that were the goal it would have happened already. Plus, it didn't seem to fit the rest of the picture. What good would death do? His work would just be continued by somebody else. He cringed at the thought of being kept on as some sort of recruit. He couldn't be drained of any more information than he had probably given over already, but he might have some use for whatever sort of facility The Creep was running. He even found himself starting to wonder whether he might get some opportunities that he wouldn't on the inside. Research that he could get his teeth into without all of the paperwork and the approvals. Without needing to prove its worth for investment. But then he shut those notions out, and he remembered something.

Rumours of a bubble. They had learned about it at uni. One of those case studies for the ways that a Project can go wrong. Used to be a thriving community. A way to adapt to the still-intensifying climate. Ideas of the future from the past. No survivors, so they said.

You can't believe everything that you hear.

Sketches

Standing on the hill, Peace didn't feel any fear. She looked across at Will.

'You know a lot about the world out here, huh?'

He tilted his head back to the shack and they started walking. Before they got to the clearing, he looked like he was trying to make his mind up about something. He grabbed her arm to stop her and turned her around. Then he raised his hand and clicked his fingers. The same sound started up all around her. Peace jumped and started searching, but when she looked back he had broken into a silent laughter and she calmed down. Will walked through the scrub and clicked again. The sound echoed all around. Peace followed. He pointed over to a fern. A brown bird was staring back at her. It had a couple of different tail feathers, some white and fanned out and two speckled brown ones that curved. Will motioned for her to click. She did, and saw the bird open its little mouth and repeat. Her brain struggled to comprehend it all, and she tried clicking a few more times. She couldn't see how that sound could possibly come from a bird. More of the birds came over, and seemed equally confused about her clicking. It was like they were harbouring tiny recording devices in their bellies, and opening their beaks pressed play. When the wonder wore off, she found herself feeling guilty.

'It's so easy to get caught up in things out here.'

Will nodded and they headed back towards the shack. When they walked in, Peace noticed that Echo hadn't even left the backpack. She decided to leave him be.

'But just before we start searching, where's your notebook? That was amazing.'

Lyrebirds. They copy sounds to make their songs more interesting.

‘Did you teach them to click?’

He nodded.

‘Have you taught them any other sounds?’

A couple. I’ve got a few ideas for places that we might be able to find your brother. Is there anywhere that you want to look first?

‘Actually, I have an idea. Something that might help me guess at where he’d be.’

What’s that?

‘Do you know somewhere high up? I want to see everything. Star would have gone somewhere high so that he could have seen everything together. Then he would have gotten some impulse to look at one part of it closer. Maybe I’ll get the same one?’

I know just the place.

‘Peace,’ Echo interrupted, ‘could you take me outside for a minute? I’ve got a weak signal. I think that somebody might be trying to send through a message.’

‘OK.’

She turned to Will.

‘I’ll be back. I have a map in my big pack if you need it, but I’m guessing not.’

Peace took her backpack outside.

‘What’s up?’

‘Walk a bit further out. All the way to the street.’

‘I don’t see how that’s going to help with your signal at all.’

‘Open the bag.’

‘I don’t want you to get—’

‘Peace I’m covered in grit already. Please open it. I want to be able to look at you when I’m talking.’

She did. Echo put up his hands and pulled himself up. He looked around.

‘You know something.’

‘I do. I just don’t know how to say it yet.’

‘Just say it plainly. Like we always do.’

She heard the clicks all around her, solitary clicks setting off waves of copies. Every now and then there was also another sound. Kind of like the clicks, but more solid.

‘When you were out, I did a bit of detective work.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He had a phone in his bag and I wanted to know a bit more about him. So I put the chip into Sunseeker.’

‘Echo, you’re starting to lose the plot. You know that right? Maybe that’s what happens to bots when they get too far away from the Flagship. Maybe you need to be linked in.’

‘Peace, the chip in that phone belongs to Star. It’s Star’s phone.’

‘What?’

‘We need to get out of here. Get back to the Flagship. Get help.’

‘We don’t have time to get back to the Flagship. Or the means. Especially not from wherever the hell we are right now.’

‘Maybe we can find that guy with the truck again?’

‘What, so he can tie me down and drive me somewhere against my will? Sure worked out for us last time.’

‘I certainly trust him more than this guy, and we can’t do this by ourselves.’

‘I’m not going back to the Flagship. I’m not having Star turn out like Phil.’

‘If he isn’t like that already. He didn’t exactly waste any time with Phil, did he?’

‘Don’t say that. That’s so messed up, Echo. Why would you even think that right now?’

‘You’re thinking it too. You must be. Peace, I don’t know how much we could do even if we found Star. I know that it’s a lot to take in, but really...how could we make the situation any better? We’ll just end up the same. A mess of blood and circuits. Do you really think that Star would want to see that?’

‘I’ve got that knife. We can play along and get him to take us to Star. Then—’

‘Are you listening to yourself? We don’t even know if that’s where Star is. And if he managed to get at Star, it would be child’s play with you. Leave your stuff in the shack. Let’s go. We’ve got a chance in this Cloud of being hidden. Maybe we can find a lift to the Flagship and go get the Director. Then we can come and get Star, when we have a fighting chance.’

‘If everything that you say is right, he’s obviously found me for a reason. Running away would just make things worse for us. He’d find me again and I get the feeling that he wouldn’t be quite so chilled out that time. If there’s any chance that he will take us to where Star is, I have to take it. When we find Star, that will make three of us. We could easily get away and then get home together. Star will beat the crap out of him and we will go home like we should. Not with the two of us at the gates begging to get in and spending the rest of our lives wondering if we could have done more.’

‘I’m saying right now that I think that’s stupid. You might have some big scene planned out in your head but just because he’s your brother doesn’t mean he’s going to win. If he really has been kidnapped he could be starved and weak and who knows what else.’

‘I don’t care. I’m going to walk in there and pretend I don’t know anything. Of course he will eventually lead me to Star.’

‘How do you figure?’

‘He probably wants some research or something that Star has and is going to use me to get it.’

‘Research from somebody who has barely started their postgrad Project? And you say I’m not thinking clearly. That’s just deluded.’

‘You don’t know how valuable Star’s research is.’

‘Neither do you. It might all end up being for nothing. The fruities might fry out here and one of the other dispersers might flourish.’

‘Well, what else would Will want with me?’

‘I don’t really want to answer that question.’

Peace zipped the pack shut.

‘There’s something else, Peace.’

‘What?’

‘Messages from the Director.’

She opened her bag again.

‘To me?’

‘No, to him.’

‘When?’

‘Over the last two weeks. I got them from Sun while you were out of the shack.’

‘What do you mean to him? To Star or to Will?’

‘Jenkins knew, Peace.’

Echo loaded the messages and started from the beginning. As the text messages turned into images Peace held her hand to her mouth in case she let out a cry.

‘I’m sorry, but you need to see these. You need to see what he’s already done, and what he could do to us.’

Peace stayed quiet as the slideshow of images continued. With each new image, she checked the date.

‘Jenkins hasn’t responded to any of them?’

‘None.’

‘But he just called me a couple of days ago. Star and I mean the world to him. Even more than Jane.’

‘I guess people don’t mean as much as an idea.’

‘But it’s Star. It’s me. We’re not just any random people from the Flagship.’

‘You think that you two should mean more than others?’

Peace stared at the photographs of her brother, covered in bruises and welts and cuts. His face became less and less recognisable.

‘Why didn’t you show these to me to start with?’

‘I was hoping that you’d agree with me without me needing to show them.’

‘Wait. If you have all of those messages, can you lock onto a location?’

‘They’re all from the same place. Inside that big patch of SEQ10 that Fredricks blocked out in red.’

‘OK.’

Peace started walking so that the shack was out of sight.

‘Out you get Echo.’

‘What?’

‘We’re splitting up. You go there now, and I’ll try to buy as much time as I can for you.’

‘What if I find something that we don’t want to see?’

‘Well, then you can have Jenkins on the way.’

‘I’ve tried messaging already, Peace. I can’t. There’s too much dust and grit in me. A whole lot of things aren’t working properly. I barely know if I’ll be able to navigate there accurately.’

‘Well then, what use is your being here anyway? You can’t help me, but maybe you can help Star.’

‘I don’t want to go. I don’t want to not know what’s happening with you. Where you are. Whether you’re OK.’

‘I’ll end up there Echo. I’m just going to give you time to snoop around first. Imagine if you can find Star and help him get free so that he can ambush Will the second that we get to whatever camp he has going there? Then we can go home.’

‘What if there’s other people? Or something that I can’t get through and I end up trapped?’

‘What if he kills us in that shack and throws us in the river?’

‘You’re not helping.’

‘Off you go. Find Star, tell him what’s going on and have him ready.’

‘What makes you sure that he’s not dead already?’

‘I’m not sure. I’m hoping.’

Echo looked up at her in a desperate plea to change her mind. When she didn’t, he began to float off into the Cloud. Soon Echo was nothing but a small white spot in the dark.

Peace turned around and looked back down the path to the shack. Every step she took towards it, her body went to run in the opposite direction. She was surrounded by the clicking. There were only a few birds, but it sounded as if they were all around. When she got to the door, it opened before she knocked.

They packed up their things and got back on the bike. It felt awful to be so close to him. Almost something that she wasn’t able to do. The images of Star were burned into her mind. She was sure that Will would be able to feel her heart pounding. He must have already been suspicious about her conversation with Echo. Of course he would be. She wondered whether she should pretend that Echo had run out of power. It wouldn’t make much of a difference. Now that she was around Will again, the things that Echo had been saying made a lot more sense. There was no way that she’d be able to defend herself against him. He was so much taller and stronger than she was. She’d have to play along and hope that the Director would get there first.

He parked the bike close to the top of a hill, and got his notebook out of his satchel.

Do you have any questions before you go up there?

‘What do you mean?’

The way that you spoke about it, it seemed like you had something in mind.

She shook her head.

‘Just curious.’

Will walked up ahead of her. Everything seemed different about him now. The way he walked. The way he smiled. Every bit of him calculated. When he got to the top, he sat on the rail. He had to be holed up in The Ranges, she thought. That seemed to be the only place that somebody could be left alone and do whatever he was doing. She thought about the members of Upper Management who had gone missing. Their kidnapping and torture explained away as the work of drifters. But looking at him now, she guessed that he’d been responsible for each and every one of them. She frowned as she wondered just how many things she had grown up accepting in blind faith. Thinking about the messages to the Director made her feel like nothing had reason anymore. Her thoughts all used to feel solid and settled. Now it was like somebody had gone in and turned the gravity off. Everything was floating around. Colliding. Breaking apart.

When Peace got to the top of the hill, her thoughts cut out as she saw the scene in front of her. The Flagship stood off in the distance, glittering through the Cloud. It was so much larger than Peace had ever realised. She could see Boundary. And Newtown, too. The Flagship sat bold like a spider in its web, with the satellites as tolerated mates. Surrounding the cities was a ring of factories, each of them streaming thick, black smog up to meet the dark, putrid sky. Peace thought of the kooky nuts that had accosted her the night before. The Farmer, Gardener, whatever he was, was at work. She looked at Will sitting precariously on the edge of the rail. He

had his notebook out, at the ready. Peace tried to gather her thoughts. No matter what he'd done, or what she suspected, there were still things that she could learn before whatever happened later.

'I've been told my whole life that the Clouds were from the fires down south.'

They were at first.

'Why is it like this now?'

They started coming from people.

'You mean like a protest?'

Of sorts.

Even his handwriting seemed different now. The ways that the letters looped and overlapped started making her project all sorts of things about his mental state. Learning one thing about the world had changed so much, but all that had really changed was how she was looking at it.

'A protest against what?'

Will looked out.

Against that.

'How does it make it a protest if most people in the Flagship don't know?'

The right people know.

She moved up to the railing and sat next to him. She was sure that he wasn't going to do something clumsy like push her down a ravine. It felt good to be on his level, even though she

still had to tilt her head up to look him in the eyes. He didn't have such a calm and casual manner now. He was looking down intently at the Flagship. She felt the hate around him as it started to reach out to her. Every few seconds Peace would remember what she was looking at, and her mind would reset.

'I don't remember those mountains in Geography.'

Those are the trash heaps.

'But everything gets recycled?'

It takes resources to recycle. The Flagships don't have enough of that to go wasting on something like recycling. They need it all for production. They just need people to keep being happy to throw things away so that they can buy new ones.

'What usually happens with the smoke if it isn't always going into the sky?'

They store a lot of it underground. Somebody else's problem later on.

Peace was trying to resist the urge to vomit, but the hot liquid kept clawing up her throat. She hung her head between her knees and saw tears falling onto the dry ground beneath the lookout.

'I feel like every person that has spoken to me since I left must think that I'm a complete idiot.'

A lot probably do. A lot of people are very bitter. But if a person is raised to think that they aren't harming anything, then that's what they know. You might be able to get through to a few of them, but there's no point in wasting hate on people like that.

She sat back up.

‘So you mean you don’t hate the people in there?’

Only the ones who make it so everybody else can’t understand. The ones who cover things up and propagate the lies. Is it a child’s fault that they think harmful things when it’s how their parents have raised them?

‘I guess not.’

So when people are lied to about the world they live in, are they really responsible? Even if they are a part of the problem?

‘I think so. It doesn’t matter if I didn’t know that I was doing it, it just matters that I was. I feel so stupid.’

That whole structure and all of the people in that mess are built around you not realising these things.

‘But I made that,’ Peace said, pointing to the Clouds. ‘My life up until now has been years of creating those horrible things and more.’

She looked out at the thin columns snaking up into the black sky. She’d been trying to hold it back, but she had to ask.

‘Why is this Cloud so much longer than the others?’

What do you do when you speak and nobody listens? You raise your voice.

To her side, Peace could see some benches and an old map behind yellowed Perspex. She walked over to it. There were sketches of different animals and plants with long scientific names underneath.

‘Do you know which of these are still here?’

He nodded.

‘This one?’

He wrote *No*.

‘This?’

He kept the page held up.

She worked through until she found a couple of plants and lizards that got a nod. He motioned that he wanted to write and she nodded blankly.

There’s no point in focussing on the things that are gone. Focus on the ones that are still here. Those people in the cities, they cook up cocktails from the past because it’s what they know. That’s what they think of as nature. What it “should” be. They want to bring back the dead into dying into a world that isn’t meant for those creatures anymore. What they need to do is let the dust settle. See what comes out of this mess.

‘What if nothing comes out?’

It always does. I think we’re at the end of this great extinction. It might just take the world a while to get back on its feet.

Peace traced her fingers over a sketch of one of the birds that had been lost. She thought about Star. About what she'd do after she'd got him out. About them standing side-by-side in a broken world. Going back to the Flagship and trying to be a part of it. It seemed impossible that she would ever be able to do that. To go back to life as it was. To invest. To 'recycle.' She wasn't even sure if she wanted to try. Peace looked up at Will.

'You said that you knew a few places that you think would have been of interest to my brother.'

Sure. Get ready for the grand tour.

Names

As Will drove, Peace's face stayed with him. For so many years, interactions with people had been transactions. It had become more and more difficult to see them as people. As feeling and thinking beings. He wondered whether there might be some way to fix it after all. If there was something that he could do that might forgive things with her brother. If both of them could stay with him somehow and help him find his way back. But there was only one day left. Years of planning and resources spent. Not to mention that they'd come at him from all sides. All he could buy himself would be a couple of days before it ended anyway.

As they got close to the nearest trash heap, he could feel Peace peering out over his shoulder. When they pulled up, she put down her packs. She stopped every couple of metres, and he saw her deep disappointment edging closer to rage at each little item transformed. From things that she probably wanted as a kid. Things that she'd seen at friends' houses. On the TV. Ones that she'd had herself. Sometimes she would bend down and pick something up. Bottles. Books. He saw the memories playing over her face. Every last one of them being tainted by the heap that towered behind her. She stared up at it. He took out his notebook.

I've given them names, you know. The heaps. Climbed them too. You get quite a view up there. They're a part of the world as much as anything else now.

'That doesn't seem right.'

I used to think that way too. But 'right' or not, they're here to stay. And they grow.

Darlings

Sometimes Sebastian saw black wisps of the Cloud and thought that it was all over. That The Creep had robbed the last thing from him. Seb saw their wings taking flight, only to live as long as butterflies. His little darlings. His mind would give the wisps shape, and they would soar across the sky. Sometimes they would even approach. Then the puffs of the Cloud would disintegrate and he knew what it was to be grateful again.

Every time, it would take him back to when they'd been assigning Projects. Everybody else had been so sure about which of the dispersers they wanted, but none of the options had screamed out at him. It wasn't as if he didn't have the interest, more that he saw the value in them all. And then after the birds and the rodents and everything else had been taken, he was left with a cage full of timid little things that had wrapped themselves up in their leathery wings against the light. He learned that the sky used to be full of them of an evening. That they would terrorise the local fruit trees and bushes for everything on offer. But imagining those little things in flocks of thousands was like imagining a dragon navigating through the sky.

Seb had set to work on them and they soon took over everything else as the most viable option. They got the prime spot in the lab, and Seb was given his own assistants. It seemed that before long they would be releasing streams of them out into the Surrounds. That Phil's forests would get planted and that the world might start to look something like it used to. The only problem left was the Clouds. And then as he was lost in his thoughts, a new shape came to his window. The little white Buddybot peered in.

Earth

After the trash heaps, he did the rounds. He took Peace to the blackened forests. To fields of dead soil. To dry rivers with the old inhabitants fossilizing under its bed.

I don't want you thinking that I blame all of this on the Flagship. We all had our part in this. I know that. It just doesn't sit right with me that so many people have the truth kept from them. That they honestly think they no longer have this sort of effect on the world.

'I really thought that we'd gotten to a place where we were finally past it. I keep thinking of the history books. Of all of that ink on paper that claims how far we've come. And it's all just a bunch of nonsense. The whole world is just trashed.'

Will bent down and picked up a handful of earth. He put it in Peace's hand. It felt cool as she filtered it through her fingers, and returned it to the ground.

Not everything. I've seen a lot of things grow. Encouraged them. It's still possible.

The devil's twine. The beetles. Whatever made the holes in her brother. The sun was low.

'The man who helped me to get out of the Flagship shaded a big section of SEQ10 on my map. Why did he do that? What's out there?'

There was a lot of activity there when they were still maintaining it.

'Maintaining what?'

I'll show you.

Billboard

The doubt kept setting in, but the ball was rolling. There were things that couldn't be changed. Promises made. Debts to be paid. Every time he looked up at the sky, the swirling black mass made the other possibilities subside. He was sure that she knew now. And yet there was something between them that kept it from coming out. Don't ask, don't tell. He wondered whether he could unhook Star and make it all right, or whether whatever was happening between him and Peace depended on what they each knew staying inside their heads. She had her arms around him as they rode. Probably so she won't fall, he reminded himself. But she hadn't done that on the way to the lookout. She had her head against his back. She was tired. If nothing else, he decided, at least there could be one night of rest before tomorrow. Before the day when all of those history books would have to be cast into the trash heaps, too.

He stopped at the first billboard so that she could read it. That was the best prelude to the dome. When they got going again, Will didn't stop because that's where the bundles started. The suit bundles. The dress bundles. The little bundles of leggings and sweaters. Even the pet bundles with their tiny, four-legged jackets. He always took care to never look too closely at the blue ones.

Before long, the dome was visible through the trees. When he stopped, Peace got off the bike and leaned against one of the larger roots of a strangler fig. She pressed her hands against the moss and looked up into the canopy of the rain forest. In her exhausted face, he saw some relief. Then, he saw her face change as she looked up and saw Terraria.

Bike

First Seb heard the bike. He saw him. Then her. He tried speaking. Not this time. Then he heard a rattling behind him as somebody tried to open the door. Too quick for it to be him. It just had to be Echo. Eventually he heard the door creak open. He could feel the hesitation as Echo hovered behind him. Wished he could say something. Slowly Echo hovered around front.

Star looked back at Echo's mortified expression. He had no idea how much his face had changed over the past couple of weeks, but that gave some indication.

'Blink once for yes and twice for no. Yes.'

Star complied.

'No.'

And again.

'All right,' Echo said as he hovered over to the drip. 'Is this keeping you alive?'

Two blinks. Star felt the needle poking around in his hand as Echo tried to remove it. Eventually he succeeded and he felt blood dribbling out of the hole where the needle had been.

'I guess you're still gonna need some time before you can move huh?'

One blink.

'I'll keep guard.'

Just Me

They walked in past a guardhouse, and then stood in a chamber as the air was cleaned. For the first time in two days, Peace took an unlaboured breath. They began walking down the street. All of the houses and gardens had been kept so neatly that she was expecting people to pop out and welcome her to the neighbourhood. It made their absence even more eerie.

Will led her to a small park on a corner, and they sat on a bench looking out at the neat rows of houses.

‘What is this place?’

My home.

‘Where is everybody?’

It’s just me.

‘Why?’

It failed.

‘But everything still works?’

Mostly. It couldn’t support what it used to. There’re a lot of things that I don’t know how to fix.

‘Were the people from the Flagship?’

The first generation was farmers and rural people. This was before the satellites were about. People were banding together, but for a lot of folk this was the smart decision.

‘You mean you were born here?’

Yeah. By the time it got to my parents’ generation, they’d never been on the outside. Didn’t need to. Deliveries came in from the cities with everything. Anything that you could want for a simple life was right here.

As Peace was reading, the layers of text that he had erased seemed heavier on the page. She could see a newsagent from where she stood. There must have been hundreds of notebooks in all of the stores combined. She couldn’t read much of what had been on the page, but reckoned it was a journal from the early days. It was the occasional word that jumped out. *Waiting. Maybe. Perhaps.*

‘Why did they leave?’

Will wrote for a long time. Erased some parts. Wrote them again. A breeze came down the street and she marvelled at the touch of it on her face. The Cloud was kept at bay by the gleaming hemisphere above. She could see it pressing against the dome. He offered her the book.

Upper Management shut it down. Came one day with the shipment and told us that it would be our last. That we’d have to start making our own way. Trading with other cities. People here left in little groups. Just a couple of them sometimes. A lot of kids got left on their own. More each day. After a while, some of the kids went out in groups, too. The number of us left kept getting smaller and smaller until I was the only one hanging around the purification chamber at the end of the day, just waiting for somebody to come back in.

She read the passage a few times. Partly to make sure that she'd read it properly, and partly to give her time to know what to say.

'Maybe they didn't come back because they found somewhere else?'

He shook his head.

'Why didn't you go with them?'

A lot of them couldn't understand that. Other people my age. Maybe I knew my parents better than they knew theirs. If nothing had happened, then they would have come back for me. There were some parents that wouldn't have. I think that's why those kids thought they'd try their luck. Things were crazy for a while there, though, when it was only us kids. That's how a fair bit of stuff broke in the beginning. Frustration and violence.

She didn't say anything for a long time, so he took his notebook back.

You want something to eat? You must be starving.

Looking down the street she was just waiting for Star and Echo to come running out from one of the houses. The only thing to do was keep Will away from wherever he had Star. Give Star and Echo the time to get themselves together.

'Sure. That would be great.'

At first it felt like accepting an invitation into his home was about the most foolish thing she could do. But when she got thinking about the day, it didn't seem to make a difference. A house. The bubble. The Surrounds. It all seemed to be his home. What did a few walls matter when the whole world seemed to be his playground?

Weeds

As they walked along the footpath, Peace started asking all sorts of questions about the solar panels and water treatments, but he could see her looking into the windows of each of the houses as they passed by. Even still, he found himself wondering if there wouldn't be a way to at least stretch things out a little. Keep her brother hooked up so that he wouldn't go anywhere and help her to understand more about life on the outside. But he finally had the Director's attention, and all that he had to do now was organize the meet. If he wasn't prompt about that, the Director had made it perfectly clear that he'd scour through the towns until he found him. After he'd finished with the satellites it wouldn't take him long to consider Terraria. Will didn't want a fight on home ground.

As they were walking he noticed that there were a couple of weeds in the flowerbeds of some of the houses. Grass starting to look a little raggedy. He tried not to think about it. Told himself that there would be time later on to deal with upkeep. But when she spoke he had to get her to repeat things because he couldn't focus on her. He kept noticing more and more things astray the further that they walked.

Every street that they went down made him think about the many days that he'd spent in those gardens. What he'd given them and what they'd given him in return. For each yard, he wondered whether this might be the last time that he'd see it. He looked over at Peace's terrarium and imagined all of his own plants trapped with nobody to care for them. He thought of all the animals he was raising in the pet shop. Of it all finally dying. Just like it was meant to.

Fingertips

There was no tinge to the sky now. No visitors. Seb had been concentrating on his hand for about an hour. He had his fingertips back. Weakly, but moving. Echo was keeping watch at the door but there had been no sign of The Creep whatsoever. He kept imagining what Peace might be enduring and he still had no better way of communicating with Echo than the blinking system.

He still couldn't turn his head to see what was available to him in the room, but he'd take anything. The chair he was sitting on. The needle in his arm. Seb kept the loop going in his brain, of the ways that things might play out when he found him. Maybe he'd even return a couple of the favours. Wait until The Creep was out on one of his trips and then trawl through the forest. Collect a few specimens. Seb might not have an exact knowledge of the area, but he was pretty confident that he would be able to sort out something. Some insect. Some flower. Something from a lecture that was lurking in the back of his mind. He'd find it, bring it back, and then set to work. Everybody had something to lose and he meant to find out what that was.

Star kept getting images of Peace strapped to the chair in the kitchen. Maybe it wouldn't be that way. He did seem to specialise. And she hadn't been unconscious on her way in. The more he thought about it, the more sense it made that Peace was about to endure her own fresh hell. Of what sort he couldn't be sure.

Echo came over to check on him and he managed his first word.

'Peace.'

Sprout

The meal was beautiful. Probably the best that she'd ever had. The meat wasn't grown, that much was clear. Peace tried not to think about where it might be from. She'd never eaten in silence before, but it didn't seem right asking him to sit with his pen and notebook at the table when it was done up so nicely. When they had finished, he went and sat in the lounge room with a glass of whisky. It made Peace feel uncomfortable that he hadn't stayed in the room with her. Didn't mind what she walked around the house doing. Didn't feel that she was any threat at all. Things hadn't played out this way in her mind. Star and Echo were meant to have arrived so long ago in that version. There were things that she could use everywhere. Kitchen knives and a hammer and all of the commonplace things around a house that could be turned against you. She went to her pack and tucked the knife in her boot, and then for a lack of anything else to do went to the lounge room to join him. Peace walked up to some pictures on the wall.

'She was very beautiful.'

He looked up at the frame.

What are your parents like?

'They're pretty hopeless. They remind me of what you said about the Projects in the Flagship actually. Hanging on too much to the things that have passed. My brother doesn't get on much with them either. Hasn't for a long time.'

That's a shame. Family's important.

‘Star’s my family.’

Will flicked his watch a few times in quick succession.

‘Why do you do that?’

My Dad gave it to me. It’s one of those sorts that wind when you move them.

‘You know that just normal movement is enough right?’

I know.

‘What happened to your throat?’

His face darkened.

‘I’m sorry. You don’t need to tell me.’

But then he started writing.

It’s ok. It would be nice to tell somebody. People here had an old sort of tech. Before they made the bots and chips for phones.

‘For what?’

Same as your bot. Monitoring. It started as a way to see how the experiment was going. Kept on for other reasons.

‘What reasons?’

We were never told, but when I got to the bodies on the outside they were all the same. Bled out. Proximity thing I guess. These spidery wires sticking out of their throats. I hadn't seen any of that before I left, but when nobody came back I wasn't taking any chances.

'You cut it out?'

Nod.

'Why did you lose your voice?'

I didn't know what I was doing. I'm lucky I didn't die. Eventually I got it together enough to stitch myself up.

He got up and walked to the mantelpiece, and returned with a jar. Inside was a tiny thing. A metallic sphere with the Flagship Tech logo stamped on it. Peace could see the little silver sprout.

Jenkins was there that day, before he was director. I must have been fifteen, I guess. He was flashing smiles and assuring that deals could be entered into with Newtown and Boundary. Maybe even The Ranges. All the while knowing that when they stepped too far away, every face and mind that he was talking to would become a tangled mess.

He looked up at the photo of his parents again. Peace felt nauseous. She put her head in her hands.

You've had a lot to soak in today. I'll make you some tea.

But all she could see were the words behind what he had written. It was hard to read any of them in particular. It was more the way that they were written. Different sizes. Different places. All of them sharp. Peace put the notebook down on the table and curled up on the couch.

Sent

He moved into the kitchen and got down some of the canisters from the cupboards. He scooped the little dried leaves out into squares on the chopping board as the water boiled. He added them to the pot with a good measure of honey.

When he went in with the mug, she had passed out. He stroked her head until she woke up. She took the tea gratefully. He helped her up to bed afterwards, and took off her boots. A knife fell out of the left one. He smiled at that. The tea helped her slip into a deep sleep.

Will stood looking at her for a few moments, phone in hand. He saw images in his mind of other ways that it might be. Smashing the phone. Unhooking her brother or disposing of him. Taking her and heading out for The Ranges. Or further than that. Disappearing. Living out a short life, but a happier one. All of the things that he could find that would amaze her. Things that he could discover for himself. But the weeds sprouting out of the flowerbeds and the wires sprouting out of the faces took over everything in front of him. He took the terrarium from her neck and put it under his boot heel. A soft crunch. He aimed the phone and took a photo of her. Sent. He kicked the remnants of moss and glass under the bed.

Will lay down next to Peace. He wouldn't sleep. Just lie down for a few moments. Just to feel like it used to. For there to be somebody else in the house. In the street. He took her hand like he had in Boundary but it was limp now. Her fingers didn't curl around his. The phone illuminated within a minute. After years of waiting, he wished that he'd gotten a few minutes more. He got up, pulled the covers over her, and went to pack.

Hand

Seb had the whole hand now. He kept touching each of his fingertips together in quick succession. Every movement amazed him. He could speak now, in a way. His words were all slurred but at least his voice was coming back. Every few minutes he'd try a sentence and find that his speech was clearer. Not having Echo was terrifying, but he could no longer handle the unknown with Peace. He'd asked him to come back as soon as he knew what was going on, but there was no sign yet. Then he saw The Creep striding across the ground beneath his window into the cover of the rainforest. Peace wasn't following. Seb didn't know whether that was a good thing or a bad one. He started to focus on his other hand.

Plastic

Peace woke up with a start. She went to the window and saw that the Cloud was still blackening the sky, but the clock next to the bed showed 11am. She saw the knife on the floor and panicked. She put her hand to her neck and couldn't find her terrarium. She quickly pulled on her boots, replaced her knife, and walked downstairs.

There was a note pinned to the back of the front door.

Out on a supply run. Stay inside.

Peace took it off the door. She didn't like the idea of being away when he got back, but she wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to find Star and Echo either. When she opened the door, she screamed.

There were pieces all over the stoop. Bits of plastic and wires smashed and mutilated. She grabbed what was left of the head and slid out the tray. The chip was gone. There was an enormous gouge in the plastic down the side of the bot's face and she ran her shaky fingers along it. She sank down onto the concrete and tried to pick up all of the pieces, but they were so badly broken that she stopped. She held the head in her hands.

She saw a figure coming down the street leaning heavily on the neat little fences. She considered running back inside, but he would have heard her scream from that distance. Then she saw the figure's face and ran over.

She held her big brother like he was a little one.

Star collapsed onto the stoop, gasping. She'd seen the pictures, but it was different now that he was in front of her. The handsome face in her memories didn't seem like it could have ever belonged to this broken man.

'You have to get up. He'll be coming back soon. We can get out. Find a way home.'

'No point.'

'I know how you feel. I've seen it all too. The idea of going back and living like we used to is absurd, but if we stay here there isn't going to be any living at all. Look what he did.'

'We were bait. Bait for Jenkins. He's going to take down the lot. There'll be nothing left.'

'What do you mean? He can't. One person can't do that all by themselves.'

'Yeah, but one person can get a lot of people believing in an idea. Then it's just a numbers game. If even just the people in Boundary stormed the Flagship there wouldn't be a lot that could be done about it.'

'Why wouldn't they have tried it before?' Peace asked.

'Before it might have seemed impossible. Now he's gone and given them a damn symbol.'

They looked up at the Cloud. Peace lay down next to her brother on the pieces of bot on the stoop. It was easier that way. Not having to see his face. Not having to see the pieces. Not having to see anything but the Cloud above them.

'Star?'

'What?'

‘Phil’s dead.’

‘What happened?’ Star asked shakily.

Peace tried to look into his eyes, but his swollen and misshapen face made it hard.

‘Phil and I were visiting the seed banks and—’

‘What? Together?’

‘Yeah. Well, at the time I thought that you were asking me to.’

‘Peace, why would I ever...So you led him right there?’

‘No. He must have known where they were.’

‘But Peace, Echo.’

‘I don’t have my tracker on public, I’m not an idiot.’

‘No, but I’ve got it on my phone.’

‘You WHAT? You track me on your phone?’

‘I’m sorry but with the nitwits we have for parents I didn’t want to take any chances.’

She turned to her side and picked up part of a hand. Her throat had closed up. She got onto her knees and started picking through the pieces trying to find his chip again.

‘Peace, forget Echo. We can get you a new bot. I need you to tell me what happened at those seed banks.’

‘You can’t get me a new bot. His chip is gone. Echo’s gone for good.’

‘Peace, please, there’re more important things than this to think about right now than a bot.’

She scraped all of the pieces into a pile and sat staring down at them.

‘We were at the third bank and I was tired so I stayed in the truck.’

‘Whose truck?’

‘This guy who runs errands out here. Blue.’

‘I know him.’

‘Well, Phil was taking a really long time, so Blue and I went in together and...’

‘What?’

‘He’d killed him. Taken his hand.’

‘Were the seeds ruined?’

She looked over in disbelief.

‘Yes, the seeds were ruined,’ Peace said bitterly, but then remembered how desperately she had tried to convince Blue to go the other banks.

‘Wait. He took his hand? To open the others?’

‘That’s what I figured.’

‘Of course. Why else?’ Star’s eyes widened and Peace saw something she recognized as a flash of anger shoot through them. Some part of her brother returning.

‘Peace. If he has that hand he can get into my lab.’

‘Star, your friend has died and all you can think about is bats?’

‘Peace, if he has knocked out all three banks, he’s crippled the Project almost irrevocably. If Phil were in my position he’d be asking the same questions.’

‘I bet that he wouldn’t be.’

‘Are you sure that he went back for the other two?’

‘I don’t know,’ she glowered, but felt pangs of shame for her own attempt earlier.

‘Well, if you’d been to the other two and he’d been watching on the phone, he’d have found them easily enough. And if he can get in through my lab he would have a shot at getting into the Flagship. Peace, we have to get there somehow. Help me up.’

Peace thought of Jenkins and carefully chose her words.

‘When we were out there, Echo took his phone—your phone—for a bit. When he didn’t know. We brought Sunseeker along too, and Echo put your chip back in her.’

‘What did you bring her for?’

Peace breathed a few times with closed eyes.

‘Echo wanted to. But he said that Will had been using the phone to contact the Director.’

‘He has. For a couple of weeks. Peace, I don’t blame him. I really don’t. He did what anybody would have. There’s no point in losing a whole Project or a bunch of people just to get back one life. Particularly someone who isn’t even worth that much yet.’

‘How can you talk about yourself like that?’

‘I didn’t say that I’m worthless, just not worth much yet. It’s a reasonable decision, Peace. How long have you been out in this Cloud? You sound addled.’

‘Why do you think he hasn’t come yet?’

‘Who?’

‘The Director. Why isn’t he coming?’

He thought for a moment.

‘Maybe he is? Now that it’s both of us. Maybe that’s where that sicko went. Makes sense that he’d go somewhere else to meet up so there’d be no danger of him finding us.’

‘Oh no.’

‘What?’

‘I know where he is. I know where he’d meet the Director.’

‘How are we going to get there? I can barely walk?’

Just then she heard a sharp buzzing sound. It kept happening, but it wasn’t the constant sound of a machine. Peace headed out to the entrance chamber. She was sure that it wouldn’t be Will. He’d have no need to buzz into Terraria, and he wouldn’t expect her to be roaming around to let him in anyway. He’d made that perfectly clear with his present on the porch.

When she saw the blue truck parked out front, she started running.

Invisible Guns

Will could see the entourage from a long way off. He parked on the side of the street and stepped onto the crackling leaves with at least ten scopes on him. Down in front of the shack, the Director was waiting. As Will walked down the path, flanked by soldiers on both sides, he opened his satchel. There was a clicking all around as they readied their guns. Will held up his arms, notebook and pen in hand. Identical clicks began popping up all over the site. Invisible guns being cocked. Three soldiers kept their scopes on Will while the rest scanned the area.

‘Where is she?’ the Director demanded. Will looked into the Director’s face. He almost hadn’t believed it up until that moment. Passed it off as the fevered ramblings of desperate men.

Down by the river.

The way that the Director ran confirmed it for good. As the soldiers marched Will down the slope he could see the top of her snout poking out of the murky water. The Director stopped right on the edge, desperately looking up and down stream. She launched out of the river and clamped her jaws around the Director’s legs. His screams were silenced as she dragged him under. The troops ran over and started shooting aimlessly into the water.

As soon as the gunfire had started, the sound of shots had rung from all around. In the confusion, Will disappeared into the scrub. He stepped on something soft, and saw one of the fallen lyrebirds under his boot, its tail feathers soaked in blood. Just as he got to his bike, there was a tremendous crash above. Large, black drops began to fall on his white shirt. Their seeding had finally taken.

Revolt

Star was managing to sit up now in Blue's truck. By the time they'd arrived, there was nothing left but bullet casings and blood.

'It's entirely possible that the Director's fine, Peace,' Star assured her from the truck as Blue helped him out. 'Maybe the meet went bad and he ran off and they are in pursuit?'

Peace walked over to one of the dead lyrebirds. She picked it up gently and walked it up to the top of the hill. Blue followed, supporting the hobbling Star. At the top of the hill, Blue set Star down in the leaf litter. Star dug his fingers in the leaves and crunched them.

'I can't tell you what it's like to know that things are real again.'

'Blue, can you please throw this bird down into the river?' Peace asked.

Blue gave her a questioning look but didn't ask anything. He took the lyrebird from her hands and gave a swing, letting the body fly down into the water. It splashed, sinking for a moment before it resurfaced. All three of them looked down at the river intently, but only Peace saw the initial ripples as she came to investigate. As the crocodile drew near to the bird's body, she showed her head above the water. They all kept watch. The croc bumped the morsel with her snout a few times, and then lost interest. Peace sank down into the leaves with her brother.

'He's gone.'

'That was brilliant!' Star exclaimed, wide-eyed, and wishing he could use his legs to get a closer look.

‘That was smart, Peace. She would have taken one of us whole. I’ve seen a couple of small crocs floating about on my travels out here, but nothing anywhere near that size! And what do you mean gone? Who’s gone?’

‘It wasn’t smart. I knew that she was there,’ Peace said, drawing her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. ‘And she did take one of us whole. Or else she’d be hungry.’

‘You don’t know that.’

Peace looked straight on at her brother and clicked. A few clicks echoed around them, but no adventurous birds sought them out. Peace hung her head and cried. Blue walked over to check the shack and Star shuffled across to comfort his sister.

‘If that’s true, then he died trying to look after the thing that is the most important to him in the world.’

‘No he didn’t. The Director doesn’t really care about stopping these horrible Clouds or this planet or any of it.’

‘That’s not true,’ Star said as he cradled her. ‘The Flagship might not be as green as it proclaims, but it needs a way to fund the Projects because the Projects are the only real shot that we have. You might have been exposed to a lot out here very quickly, but you must still believe in that.’

‘I guess so.’

‘I really hate to say it, but I guess Birch and Wattle were right about that much. Nothing is black and white in this world. And the grey is sure where it gets interesting,’

Peace hugged him harder.

‘But don’t you ever tell either of them that I admitted that,’ Star said, smiling down at her.

‘And anyway, I didn’t say that he died trying to save the world. He died trying to save you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, there’s a reason why Birch and Wattle hate the Jenkins so much.’

Peace sat up and frowned as she listened.

‘When I was little and started to get picked for all of those courses and tests, I became friends with Kate Jenkins. I don’t know if you remember her.’

‘I don’t, but Jenkins talks about her sometimes.’

‘I guess you were about three when she died. Anyway, before that, Jenkins’ wife fell pregnant with twins. If he was an ordinary citizen of the Flagship, it might have just been frowned upon to have three children, but for someone in his line of work it would have been political suicide. Nobody would believe that he wanted a sustainable world if he and his wife were leaving behind more people than the world started with. So they had to give one away.’

Star let Peace sit and think for a moment.

‘I’ve wanted to hear that my whole life.’

‘Not in these circumstances I bet.’

‘Why are you telling me this now?’

‘Because if he really has gone, then you have a right to know. He promised me that he’d tell you once you got out of the house and into Flagship Tech, but it wouldn’t feel right to keep it from you right now if what you say is true.’

‘Star?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Let’s not go back.’

‘I can’t do that, Peace.’

‘Because of bats?’

‘It’s not just the bats. Or even just the seeds. If he has Phil’s hand he has access to the whole damn place. He could be letting whoever he likes in right now.’

‘I don’t want to live like that anymore. I don’t want to have to buy things just to waste them. I don’t want the trash piles to keep getting higher and higher.’

‘Well, unless you plan on killing every person living in the Flagship, that’s going to keep happening. Not contributing yourself isn’t going to do much. But getting your own Project and fighting against the tide? That’s worth it. When you’re Flagship Tech, you’re above all of that buying and scanning nonsense. They just leave you be to get on with your work. When this is all over, you can move in with me in the city centre. I promise.’

‘I’ve just realized something awful.’

‘What?’

‘You’re not my brother anymore.’

‘Not by blood, no. But we still grew up like that.’

‘Did you know the whole time?’

‘Of course. I was just happy to have a sister. And that I didn’t end up with Jane the almighty airhead.’

Peace leant into his chest and cried softly.

Blue came back out of the shack. ‘I need to get moving. Where can I take you first?’

Peace stood up.

‘The Flagship.’

Star smiled. When he stretched out his legs he found that some movement had come back. He clumsily got up and limped to the truck with Peace and Blue on either side ready to catch him.

When they got on the road, Peace began to notice other vehicles.

‘Blue?’

‘Yes, Miss Kelly?’

‘Is it possible for people to take down the Flagship?’

‘I’ve heard of it happening in other areas. Three of them at least.’

‘Five,’ Star added.

‘Do they destroy everything?’

‘Not everything, but life won’t be anything like it was once enough people get in.’

‘What happens?’

‘Things get hard for everyone,’ Star said. ‘Sometimes the whole infrastructure collapses under the strain, and then it’s back to square one for everybody.’

‘Has it worked for any of them?’ Peace asked.

‘Depends what you mean by worked,’ Star replied.

‘Well are there some Flagships that didn’t entirely collapse?’ she asked.

‘The infrastructure stayed semi-functional in two of them. It’s still supporting everybody for now, but there’s no telling when it will give out,’ Star said as he massaged his knees.

‘Have those two Flagships kept up the Projects?’

‘One did. When you have that many people relying on a system, there’s not enough resources for anything but keeping the population fed and healthy,’ Star said in a matter-of-fact way.

As they started getting closer to the Flagship, there were people everywhere. Blue had to slow the truck down to a crawl due to the amount of people trying to flee. Some of them were clutching at belongings. Most were past that. Everyone was filthy from the black rain, and when she looked down at the ground Peace could see abandoned photographs and belongings all over the road that were soiled with footprints and tyre marks.

When they got closer again, Peace started to see people getting taken down. Shot. Stabbed. Sometimes just beaten. None of them went for Blue’s truck, and a lot probably assumed

that he was out for his own piece of the action. Peace saw a few of them give him a salute. Star was lifting his legs up and down to get the circulation moving. They were coming up to the main gates.

‘OK, keep going around,’ Star instructed.

‘How are we going to get in?’ Peace asked.

‘How I always do. The Tech tunnel.’

Magic

A group from Boundary were waiting in a jeep at the Tech tunnel for him. Young kids. He thought that he recognised one or two from a couple of nights ago in the hall. They all seemed the same when they got that gung-ho look in their eyes.

There was the heavy, sealed door with the Flagship Tech logo, as her brother had promised. Will walked up to the sprout bursting through the sidewalk. He could feel a prickling in his throat. Like a phantom limb. The kids got out of the car and set up their homemade bombs. One of them was standing too close. When it exploded, little chunks of metal came out and shredded his leg. The arteries flopped about as he writhed and screamed. The rest of them ran to him. Shouted at each other. Tried to pick him up.

They got out of the way when Will aimed at his head. After the shot there was silence. They followed suit as Will walked through the busted entrance. They stood further back for the next one. When they got to the final door, they stationed themselves on guard. Will reached into his satchel and took out the plastic bag. He unwrapped the hand, pressed the thumb to the scanner, and the doors slid open.

He hadn't been expecting a welcoming party, but an empty lab wasn't high on the list either. He dismissed the Boundary kids and strolled along the rows of desks, going in for a closer look here and there. He didn't know why, but he figured that at least some of it would make sense to him. It didn't. All of the little jars and notes were like spells. Magic. And in the centre of it all, a giant aviary with little black shadows darting to and fro.

Insects

Star had Blue stop by the side of the road and then Blue drove off to find his children. As Peace and Star rounded the corner, they saw the ragged hole in the door and the festival of insects on the body at the entrance.

‘I’m going in,’ Star said. ‘Go into the plantation and wait for me.’

Peace did as he asked. She hid behind one of the particularly thick trees and looked out into the rest of the plantation. She could see the white nodes all over the trees. When she looked down at her feet, brown beetles were scuttling over and around her shoes. They made her feel sick, and soon she couldn’t stand it anymore.

She left her packs in the plantation, but she took her knife with her.

Mask

Will pressed the thumb against the door to the aviary, and then let the hand fall to the ground. He hadn't intended on staying in there, but he got stuck staring at one of the flying foxes that was roosting nearby. It looked just like it ought to. He hadn't been expecting them to have two heads or six legs, but he wasn't ready for them to be so close to the real thing.

The little creature peeked out from under its wing. He couldn't stand looking at it anymore, so he got to work lining up the canisters. Set them for thirty seconds. As he sealed the door, he could hear a faint hissing sound. He watched as they began to plummet to the ground. Not enough time to even spread their wings. If the gas wasn't taking care of them, then their necks certainly would be.

He looked over at the final seed bank in the corner. As he bent down to pick up the hand for its last task, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor. Stargazer Kelly launched into the room. Will ran up behind him and smashed Star's head onto one of the tables full of bottles and vials. Star screamed as blood poured from his face. Star grabbed one of the bottles, smashed it open and shot the contents into Will's eyes. The skin bubbled and hissed. Will could barely see as Star grabbed his long hair in one fist and started pummeling his face with the other one. And that might have been it if Star hadn't caught sight of the aviary and his flying foxes dropping to the ground. Star dropped Will, ran to the aviary door, and slammed his palm against the scanner. The door slid open. Will's mask was hanging down at his side. Star fell to the floor, bleeding from eyes, nose, and ears. As Will fumbled for his mask, he heard more footsteps.

Dust

When Peace entered the room Will grabbed her and forced the mask over her head. She saw Star's body and started lashing out with the knife, slicing Will across his face and hands. When he fell to the floor and began convulsing, Peace looked over at Star, dropped the knife, and clung to the mask. Between the gas and the lacerations, Will, covered in blood, sank down onto the floor. There was something looped around one of the tubes at the side of the mask. Gently ticking.

She gripped the mask against her face and tried to get back through the door, but the area had been sealed off. The lights had dimmed and a siren had started up. Through the darkness, she saw a flash of blue as Echo struggled out of Will's satchel. He was moving more slowly than she'd ever seen him, but he boosted over near Star's lifeless body and picked up Phil's severed hand. It was heavy, and he dipped and weaved as he moved over to the door of the seed bank. He got it a metre away before he shut down and landed in a heap on the floor.

Peace ran over and picked up the hand. Echo was still clamped on to a couple of fingers even though he was lifeless and his screen blank. The door of the seed bank slid back, and she pressed the red button next to it. The chamber sealed shut. She looked around. Saw all of the little jars with their numbers. Everything intact. She wanted a coat, but her hands were gripped tight. One to the mask on her face and one to the hand with Echo attached. Exhausted, she knocked off the coats with her elbows and huddled under them.

~ ~ ~

Hours later, troops found Peace shivering under the coats with one hand pressed so hard against the mask that it had sliced the bridge of her nose. She was talking to the powered-down bot in her lap, saying over and over again: ‘When the dust settles...when the dust settles...’

Words

At 5:59, Birch Kelley's eyes snapped open. He went out into the hall and let the gong ring out. He looked in on Peace. She was lying in bed with her eyes open. Every now and then she would shake the watch on her arm. Wattle came and joined him with a package. They went over to the windowsill and disconnected Echo from the solar panel. He sat sedentary after they booted him up, looking out the window.

Clean up was still on, but the street was starting to resemble itself again. Aside from all of the tents. Birch and Wattle had encouraged as many as they could to camp in their own yard. Peace couldn't remember the last time that her parents had been so busy, doing everybody's washing, cooking, and trying to track down necessities. Peace had seen Flagship vans come by now and then, but they didn't try to kick anybody out. There were just too many. Even Peace's neighbours had gotten in on the spirit. She could hear snatches of conversation coming in through her window now and then, so much like the ones that she had been having a week before. Disbelief. Anger. She'd never thought that feelings like that could bring people together. Stretching over everything was a clear, blue sky.

'The funerals are today,' Wattle reminded Peace.

Wattle held out a gift-wrapped box and opened it. A new black dress sat neatly inside.

'There's no point in going,' Echo said from the windowsill.

‘There’s all the point in the world, honey,’ Birch said to Peace. ‘Grieving is something that should happen with others.’

‘Don’t you want to be there for Jane?’ Wattle asked.

Peace could feel the stitches on the bridge of her nose every time that she blinked. She waited for Wattle and Birch to open up and tell her everything that Star had, but they didn’t.

‘At least come for your brother’s ceremony.’

Peace sat up and moved to the edge of the bed.

‘That’s our girl,’ Wattle encouraged.

‘I don’t see what going to a ceremony does.’

‘You might not now, but I think it would be something that you’d regret later,’ Birch said softly.

‘Do you want to start with some breakfast? I’ll make you anything you like,’ Wattle offered.

Peace hadn’t eaten in days and the thought of food made her feel sick. She shook her head. She went to the window and looked out. It was hard to say whether it was going to work or not, but things were certainly going to be different.

‘Do you think that the Flagship is going to run out of food?’ Echo asked.

‘Depends what you mean by the Flagship,’ Birch responded. ‘I expect that Upper Management is keeping a good deal of food for itself. We, on the other hand, are making our own plans.’

Echo turned away from the window. Birch was smiling down at him.

‘What? The veggie garden?’ Peace said with a grim smile.

It might not have been a huge breakthrough, but it was a start.

‘Bigger than the veggie patch, love. Your father has been busy at work. All of these changes mean that we can start planting out there. There’s nobody left telling us that here is the Flagship and there is the Surrounds. And there’s certainly enough people willing to get their hands dirty. We can start whole farms.’

‘What if people steal what you grow?’

‘I dare say that some will,’ Birch replied. ‘That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try.’

Peace went up to Birch and, for the first time in a long time, gave him a hug. Her arms easily went all the way around his scrawny figure. She held on tight. Then she thought of Star and the tears came.

‘I want to help. Not right now. Soon.’

‘Of course,’ Birch said, stroking her hair.

‘What’s going to happen to all of the Projects?’

‘Everything is on hold for now.’

‘Have they cut off the power?’

‘No. Everything’s safe. And you’ve got a decision to make when you’re feeling ready.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The Flagship still seems to be respecting contracts. Your brother and the Director specified that anything remaining from Star’s project be left to you.’

‘The last bank? But I don’t know what to do with them at all. I’d plant them and they’d get scorched and flooded and then they’d be gone forever.’

‘It’s going to be kept for you, until you’re ready.’

‘What’s happened to school?’

‘I don’t see why the schools would need to close. I guess we don’t know how anything is going to work out yet. You might just have a lot of new classmates. And new subjects, hopefully. We’re going to have to wait and see.’

Peace moved to her windowsill. The ones in the outdoor box had curled up and died. She got some leaves for the ones still scuttling around in the tank on her dresser.

‘If you’re interested,’ Wattle said casually, ‘there’s somebody camped out in our yard that is quite anxious to see you.’

‘Who?’

‘He said that he’d rather tell you in person. A friend from your travels, I guess? It’s quite a week that you’ve had. Not that we know most of it, of course. Just rumours really. I look forward to hearing it from you.’

Peace started downstairs and Echo hovered after her. When they got downstairs, her parents walked out with her into the garden. She stood scanning all of the tents in her yard for a familiar face. She knew what she was looking for. Fearing for and yet hoping for. Will’s face. Against all of the odds. But then she found somebody else’s.

‘Good morning, Miss Kelly,’ Blue said, appearing out of a tent. After him came two grimy kids. ‘I’m sure glad that you got in all right. I thought it might be tricky to track you down, but it seems like everybody knows your name right now. I’ve got a couple of tykes I thought you’d like to meet.’

There was a girl and a boy. They were holding her old picture books. Both of them were silent. There were no sets of eyes for hours around that would have avoided the horrors completely.

‘Hi there. Do you like the books?’

The children both nodded.

‘Have you read them?’

‘We’ve read the pictures,’ the girl said earnestly.

Peace smiled up at Blue, then sat down on the grass.

‘OK. Come and sit. I’ll read you the words.’

Part 2: Exegesis

Young Adult Fiction in the Post-Natural Age

Chapter 1: Introduction

*You can scour the earth, from a mountaintop to the Marianas Trench.
You will never find Nature. It's an empty category looking for something
to fill it. (Morton, 2013a, p. 83)*

This introduction provides an overview of the theoretical underpinning for the thesis, locating the study in the field of ecocriticism and specifically postnaturalism, by drawing on key texts and influences. The chapter also defines additional key terms that are integral to the development of the creative writing and exegetical components. The discussion concludes with an overview of the remaining chapters of this thesis and the dialogue that I have set up between them. The initial task is to come to an understanding of Nature, which, as Timothy Morton notes above, is an elusive, empty category. By beginning with Nature, we can then consider the idea of postnaturalism, a concept that underpins this thesis.

In 1996, the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader* by editors Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm marked an offshoot in the field of literary criticism. Where previous literary criticism had placed a focus on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other human interests, ecocriticism opened a space for discussing the non-human parts of the planet. As ecocriticism has developed, the definition of Nature and its relationship to human society has remained at the heart of work in the field. Deep ecologists have pushed for the needs of the Natural world to be

addressed over those of the human world (Sessions, 1995, p. 68). Ecofeminists have fought against the binary opposites they perceive as oppressing Nature, both physically and ideologically (Plumwood, 1993, pp. 47-55). More recently, a trend has flourished in the field of ecocriticism that can be traced back to one of the original essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader*: postnaturalism. While the notion of the postnatural has taken several forms since Cynthia Deitering's essay *The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s* (1996), the usage of this term now equates with a complete rejection of the concept called 'Nature.' Nature does not exist, never has existed, and never will. Throughout this thesis, the term Nature is capitalised. I made the decision to refer to Nature as a proper noun in order to draw attention to the term and also highlight its status as a set of ideas that humans use to define parts of their world. The capitalisation of Nature has become common in the field of ecocriticism due to the work of Timothy Morton, and my aims for the discussion of Nature as a proper noun are in line with Morton's original usage of the term. Morton comments that "putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (Morton, 2007, p. 5). Postnaturalism aims to remove the binary opposites that prevent a properly integrated and ecological understanding of the ecosystem, just as a feminist perspective attacks binary opposites that represent warped and segregated pictures of sex and gender. Addressing Nature as nothing but a name that humans use to label trees, animals, landscapes, and many other parts of their world is the first step in a disassociation from this term. This disassociation from the term Nature is crucial if we are to move towards more ecological thought and discussion. However, before I broach the ways in which postnaturalism and the rejection of Nature informed this thesis, I would like to explore the term Nature and how its usage in literature has evolved through time.

Nature

The results for searching ‘nature’ in Google’s Ngram viewer, a program which scans a broad corpus of texts for their mention of specific words, suggest that ‘nature’ is currently at its lowest rate of mention in the history of the data. Performing this search on texts written in English between 1800 and the present day shows a steady decline in usage of the term ‘nature,’ apart from a spike that represents the 1960s and 1970s before diving down again in the 1980s. Are we to take this decline as a loss of interest in the natural world, or as a shift in the terms that we use to discuss the non-human parts of our planet? The origins of the word nature can be traced from the Latin terms *nascor*, *natus* and *natura*, which largely centred on notions of birth, quality, or the essence of a thing (Douglas, 1872, p. 81). Even at this early stage, the term *natura* was used for both the ‘natural’ world and ‘natural disposition’ (Douglas, 1872, p. 81). From the very beginning, Nature has not only been an idea conceived by humans, but one muddled with references to an innate or pure sense of being. One common expression of the link between Nature and the idea of purity can be seen through the pervasive concept of ‘Mother Nature,’ with myths such as the Greek goddess Gaia, the pre-Babylonian Tiamat, and the Roman Terra Mater.

The discussion of whether Nature can be dominated or if it is a thing of its own essence and without external control has been central to the development of and usage of the term over time. Another early instance of this connotation is observable through two terms that appeared in the Middle Ages, *natura naturata* (nature natured) referring to Nature as passive, and *natura naturans* (nature naturing) approximating to ‘nature doing what nature does.’ These terms are most often associated with the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who is considered one of the great rationalists of the 17th century due to his contributions to Biblical criticism and 18th century

thought that pushed forward ideas that gained momentum in the Enlightenment (Nadler, 2001, xi). More recently, there was the obsession in the 20th century with the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate, where psychologists and philosophers made arguments for whether a person was largely shaped by their innate traits or through social factors. By the early 2000s, this argument was considered to be redundant as both ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ contribute to the development of a human being. However, usage of the term Nature was once again applied to the human desire to identify something uncontrollable within the self, or as a means to separate humans from the ‘natural world.’ The word Nature has both the ability to lock humans out of its ‘pure’ essence and to suggest that humans are inextricably tied to Nature, whether Nature is perceived as a thing of grand design or not.

Even when the discussion of Natural dispositions is removed, the term Nature is still far too vague to address the multitude of landscapes, species, and phenomena that the term reputedly encompasses. In 1979, the third edition of *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White noted that “nature should be avoided in such vague expressions as a ‘lover of nature,’ ‘poems about nature.’ Unless more specific statements follow, the reader cannot tell whether the poems have to do with natural scenery, rural life, the sunset, the untouched wilderness, or the habits of squirrels” (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 53). It is for this reason, and because of the influence of postnatural theory, that I based this thesis around a rejection of the term Nature. I not only reject the usage of Nature in my own discussion of literature, but argue that it has no place in an ecocritical analysis, regardless of the genre that is being examined. As this document comprises both an exegesis and a creative component, I will also argue against the usage of the word Nature in novels and creative pieces unless the discussion of this term specifically outlines

its shortcomings. Nature is a damaging concept and highlighting this is the first step towards more ecological thinking.

The Rejection of Nature

The leading theorist who argues for the rejection of Nature and seeks to examine how artistic media can engage with ecological thinking is Timothy Morton. Morton suggests that Nature “is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art” (Morton, 2007, p. 1) and that it must be done away with if ecology is to be truthfully addressed. Thinking in terms of Nature interrupts the process of ecological thinking as Nature places boundaries between different aspects of the ecosystem. These boundaries most often take the form of differentiation between humans in their built environments and the landscapes and species that exist outside of them. However, postnaturalism has not always been used as a rejection of Nature, even within the confines of the field of ecocriticism.

The first exploration of postnatural ideas in the field of ecocriticism was an essay in *The Ecocriticism Reader* entitled “The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s” by Cynthia Deitering. This essay proposes that selected fiction published in the 1980s, which represents polluted worlds on the edge of ecological collapse, was the first to come out of the postnatural age. Deitering claims that this age was spurred on by the real world “imminence of ecological collapse” (Deitering, 1996, p. 196) and selected two novels, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1986) and John Updike’s *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) from a variety of texts dealing with concerns of ecological collapse at the time. Deitering concludes that these novels reflect what William McKibben termed a “postnatural world” in his 1989 text *The End of Nature*, where humanity’s need for or reliance on Nature is purely superficial (McKibben, 1989, p.60).

Therefore, this early reference regarded postnaturalism as the ways in which humanity had distanced itself from Nature, tamed Nature, or even worked towards making Nature a redundant part of human existence.

In McKibben's text, postnaturalism represents yet another engagement with the term Nature through a broad range of ecological crises categorized under two parts: The Present and The Near Future. McKibben discusses the postnatural world in reference to a variety of ideas. Some of these ideas can be grouped around how human influence on the world has affected Natural processes, such as the wide-ranging effects of the insecticide DDT. *The End of Nature* provides specific examples of the effects of DDT on Nature, such as how bird populations suffered due to the thinning of their eggshells, which affected hatching rates and infant mortality. Other ideas discussed by McKibben can be seen as projections for how Nature will be manipulated by humans in the future, particularly his concerns regarding genetic modification. One example is the production of meat without the recognisable features of animals, describing a chicken that is merely a hunk of flesh with tubes fed in and out for nourishment and waste, as is represented in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) with the development of ChickieNobs. However, McKibben's most dominant representation of the end of Nature relates to how the release of greenhouse gases to support modern human lifestyles has irrevocably altered every part of the planet. McKibben states that "we have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial" (McKibben, 1989, p. 58). This view aligns with recent developments in ecocritical theory with respect to postnatural thought. Even though localized pollution still exists and is cause for serious concern, there is now an even more serious threat: climate change.

Global warming cannot be fixed by stopping the use of a particular chemical such as DDT, as it requires a shift in the entire way that much of human life on the earth functions.

McKibben claims that by affecting every part of the planet with greenhouse gasses “we have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us” (McKibben, 1989, p. 58). The sentiment of Nature losing its independence is repeated several times throughout the text, and forms what might be seen as a hypothesis for the work and McKibben’s primary definition of postnaturalism. While earlier ecocritical work in the mid-1990s might have aligned with this concept of Nature needing to be independent of human society, the terminology and way in which the concept is expressed no longer connect with the majority of modern ecocritical thinking. Many questions can be asked regarding these concepts. Why is it that Nature is only itself when left untouched? How can humans be separate from Nature when they are an animal as much as any other? McKibben notes that even when human behaviour has positive effects on the environment, this effect still serves to remove independence from Nature and is thus an unNatural act and product. Reforestation, even if multiple species are grown together organically and not in regimented rows, is something that is irrefutably unNatural for McKibben. From this perspective, are humans doomed to forever look over at Nature, never to be a part of it again? Is it necessary that we leave it be, even when modern scientific developments might assist Nature in the face of ecological collapse? What sparked this separation between built and Natural environments, Nature and humanity? These questions and others like them have caused a shift to a new understanding of a postnatural world, one that transgresses the notion of separation or independence all together.

There was a further suggestion in *The End of Nature* that due to the removal of Nature's independence, all children born at the time of the publication of the text (1989) and those born after it were born into the postnatural world. In discussing the ways that the world had changed since he was a boy, McKibben contends that since summers and all other manner of Natural occurrences are different to how they were when Nature was still independent, the world is now entirely postnatural. Children born in a postnatural world will never know what a Natural summer is, nor any of those other Natural aspects of the Earth such as seasons, weather, and landscapes. I was born the year before McKibben's text was published and this puts me into this category of humans who, according to McKibben, will never truly know the world before it was postnatural. This thesis does not agree with McKibben's representation of the postnatural, but it acknowledges this perspective and how this outlook might affect how authors and readers engage with literature.

In a short period of time, and with relatively sparse scholarly attention, postnaturalism has grown to take on yet another definition. Where in McKibben's postnatural world human influence has removed the possibility of Nature being independent, current notions of postnaturalism remove this concept of independence entirely. Instead of the postnatural world being one where humans have changed the ways in which the Earth functions, the new postnatural world can take on any form. It might be a utopian future where ecological collapse is unthinkable. It might be a dystopian future where every tree has been felled and every animal enslaved for human use. It might even be how the world looks in the present, whatever the present might be for the reader of the text at that time. Postnaturalism now stands not as an examination of how various spheres in the world affect each other, but as a way for thinking about our planet's ecology as a system where all its various parts are interconnected and co-exist.

Ecocritical theories and developments in postnaturalism can be applied to any process on Earth and beyond it. A postnatural perspective can be considered in relation to architecture, farming, business, economics, art, education, biology, and astrophysics. Postnaturalism can apply to all of the ways that humans occupy their time, the ways that they do not, and the things that occur without human presence at all. It also offers a challenging mode of thinking for writers and readers of fiction.

Postnaturalism and Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

This thesis focuses on creative writing and young adult dystopian fiction. Specifically, I will apply a postnatural perspective to the genre of young adult dystopian fiction to explore how projections of future ecologies are represented to young people. I will examine a set of issues that I perceive to occur at the junction of ecocriticism and young adult dystopian fiction, and discuss the role that a postnatural perspective can play in this analysis. I will argue for the importance of postnaturalism in the fields of literary analysis and creative writing by demonstrating how a postnatural perspective can inform and even resolve some of the issues present when representing ecological crises in young adult dystopian fiction. To date, only one text has placed a significant focus on a postnatural reading of young adult literature,

Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth by Alice Curry (2013). Curry uses the term postnaturalism in the same manner as Deitering, to describe degraded landscapes and post-disaster worlds (Curry, 2013, pp. 22-23). This definition of postnaturalism will not be used for this thesis, but Curry's work offers a valuable contribution for current ecocritical work on young adult literature as well as how the term postnaturalism is being perceived and used in the field.

In reading the focus literature through the lens of postnaturalism, this thesis examines the way that specific terms within a novel can be read as taking on new meanings throughout the text. These terms can be read as progressing from a singular meaning when the protagonist is under the control of a dystopian society, and to take on multiple meanings or broader contexts when this protagonist begins to rebel against the dystopian society and its ideals. The shift in the meanings behind key words in these texts can be read from a postnatural perspective as paralleling the progression of the protagonist's development towards a more postnatural understanding of his/her world, both physically and ideologically. As this thesis relies centrally on the concept that terms can be perceived in a multitude of ways and shift in meaning throughout the course of a novel, Bakhtin's ideas of dialogism and *living discourse* (Bakhtin, 1981) offered the most suitable approach for this study. While I discuss these ideas in more detail later in this chapter, a brief account of how they can assist in the development of a postnatural perspective is a necessary introduction at this point.

Working with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogic discourse enables a reader to explore the language of the novel as a meaning-making system produced by the interactions between language and ideas both inside and outside of the text. Bakhtin claims that discourse is a living concept where words constantly shift and gain new meanings, and that studying the word without this understanding is like studying psychology without the context of real life (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 292). When reading young adult dystopian fiction with a foundation in dialogism, it is possible to offer perspectives on the language represented in the novels as well as on the social, cultural, and political milieu in which these texts were produced.

My analysis aims to demonstrate how examples of young adult dystopian fiction can be read as revising the language and ideas that are used to represent ecology and ecological crises,

thus contributing to revised meanings in their representation of these ecologies to young people. I acknowledge that reading from this postnatural perspective is only one possible way of interpreting the texts, and that this process could also be applied to other genres. I also understand that my reading of these novels and application of these theories is dependent on my prior experiences with literature, my exposure to these terms outside of texts, and my own perspectives on the ecological crises in the real world. These factors shaped both my reading of the focus texts and the writing of the creative component for this thesis. I also am aware that readers bring their own experiences with literature, a language, and ideological positions and these will undoubtedly be different from mine. However, I hope to make a viable space for considering the propositions that I make in this thesis.

This thesis explores how a postnatural perspective based in coexistence and interconnectedness can be used as a lens for reading young adult dystopian fiction and examining the way that terms shift throughout the course of these novels. The shifts in terms and their affiliated ideas/meanings have the potential to revise the ways in which ecology and ecological crises are represented and discussed in the texts. Furthermore, this thesis will follow the process of my own selection of language and ideas for representation in the creative component for this thesis, and how an understanding of dialogism and living discourse had an effect upon these choices. This thesis explores how a postnatural reading can show a correlation between the evolution of significant terms within the world of the text and the progression of the counternarrative, the process by which the protagonist resists the dystopian authorities in their world. Counternarrative is the process by which the protagonist of dystopian fiction rebels against the dystopian authorities of the world through the intentional use or subversion of language, which gives them access to other ways of living in and understanding their world

(Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 5). When paired with a postnatural perspective, counternarrative serves as a mapping device that demonstrates a relationship between the shifting use of language in the novel and the protagonist's journey to understanding their ecology as a web of interconnected and coexisting landscapes, species, structures, and more. This thesis demonstrates what a postnatural perspective has to offer to the fields of literary analysis and creative writing by examining the shifts in terms that occur as the protagonist progresses through the counternarrative.

This exegetical component of the thesis includes three examples of young adult dystopian fiction published in Australia between 2010 and 2015: *Days Like This* (2011) by Alison Stewart, *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (2012) by Ambelin Kwaymullina and *The Big Dry* (2013) by Tony Davis. This thesis examines how the shifting language in these novels has a relationship with the development of the protagonist towards a more postnatural perspective by reading these novels through an ecocritical-postnatural lens via a dialogic method. The exegesis was developed in tandem with the creative component, and each part affected the other as I came to understand the importance of the postnatural perspective in both the reading and writing processes. As I analysed the focus texts in this document the exegesis assisted with shaping the counternarrative for my own novel, and the issues that I experienced with the development of my plot and protagonist gave me insight for the ways that I could explore the focus texts. In particular, as the exegesis and novel were being drafted, these processes helped to highlight inconsistencies or holes in the other, allowing me to provide a more rounded analysis and creative representation of the postnatural perspective. As the opening discussion demonstrated, postnaturalism has evolved from within the field of ecocriticism: a field that has taken many directions since it first began.

The Development of the Field of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism has been developing since the mid-1990s, but in this short time it has seen significant development and fragmentation. In a recent evaluation of ecocriticism, Pippa J. Marland discusses how the field is now in its fourth wave and branching into new territory with the offshoot of material ecocriticism (Marland, 2013, p. 855). Lawrence Buell, whose significant work in the field of ecocriticism spans a ten-year period (1995–2005), first suggested this notion of waves of ecocriticism. Buell insists that theorists, works and concepts deemed as fitting within these waves should not be considered as separate from each other, but as being in conversation through the “currents set in motion by early ecocriticism” (Buell, 2009, p. 17) and should therefore be considered more as “palimpsests” (Buell, 2009, p.17). In applying Buell’s notion of waves or palimpsests, Marland provides a documentation of the shifts in the field of ecocriticism up until 2013 in four waves which can be seen as overlapping and affecting each other. I will briefly discuss these shifts as they will demonstrate how the currents of the original work in the field of ecocriticism have shaped the ecocritical-postnatural position that this thesis adopts.

The first wave of ecocriticism was sparked by Cheryll Glotfelty’s initiative to bring academics who were writing about the environment into conversation with one another through *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Much of the early criticism was connected by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), a text warning of the effects of DDT that came to play a crucial role in the movement against this chemical. Early examples of ecocriticism largely focussed on non-fiction nature writing, particularly of American and British origin, and as a result were mainly concerned with the connection of the text to the real world (Marland, 2013, p. 848). Consequently, the way in which first-wave ecocriticism was largely perceived was

through its capacity to demonstrate how literature might convey an environmental message or forge a connection between reader and landscape. This perception is evident in Buell's statement that a work is environmentally oriented if it meets the following conditions: that a piece ought to present the nonhuman environment as more than a backdrop to the rest of the story such as being crucial to character development or plotlines; that human interest should not be considered to be the only focus; that humans are represented as accountable for affecting the environment; and that the environment should be seen as a process within the text (Buell, 1995, pp. 7–8). Buell later moved away from the need for this sort of categorising, favouring a broader acceptance of literature and perspectives that might be considered ecocritical. Glotfelty's definition of the field extended past this need for specifics from the beginning, stating that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1995, p. xix). This simple but concrete concept helps put ecocriticism into context even as aspects of it grow apart from each other. Regardless of specialised interests, ecocriticism aims to demonstrate the mutual effects of the human and nonhuman spheres upon each other, whether this is when lines of demarcation are stark, begin to blur, or even disappear altogether.

The second wave of ecocriticism is when the term Nature, which is important to this thesis's focus on the postnatural, became even more problematic. When the field of ecocriticism came together, Glotfelty commented that if a person's understanding of the world in the late twentieth century were restricted to literary journals, then they would be largely unaware of the ecological issues that were quickly gaining momentum at the time (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1995, p. xvi). As our knowledge of ecological crises and their immediacy grew, so did the desire to make ecology and its representation in literature a core point of discussion in literary criticism.

However, soon after ecocriticism distinguished itself as separate from feminist, post-colonial and other areas of literary criticism, there was what Marland terms a “re-engagement with the critical theory it had initially pulled against” (Marland, 2013, p. 851), where some strains of ecocriticism began to blend with other modes of literary criticism. While continuing to examine the relationships among literature, environment and the various ways in which these inform each other, the second wave also brought a new focus on the concept of Nature (with a capital ‘N’ emphasising its significance) to serve as a reminder of the ideologies that scaffold and construct the picture of the “natural world,” and indeed the idea that there is no “natural world” that is other to our own place of living. Furthermore, “social and sexual politics” (Marland, 2013, p. 851) became important aspects of consideration and critique, with the flourishing of ecofeminism and post-colonial ecocriticism. One of the key elements of ecofeminism that has persisted in the more recent waves is the breaking down of the binaries that position different elements of the human/nonhuman spheres. Further binary opposites and generalised representations were deconstructed within post-colonial ecocriticism, which shifted the discussion on environmentalism to acknowledge different nations’ perspectives as well as to highlight the interplay between the nations that more significantly contribute to the current ecological crisis and those that must deal with the more severe effects. At this point in the development of the field, many academics became critical of the aims of ecocriticism and the field’s ability to achieve these goals. As the applications of ecocriticism are broad, its goals are similarly diverse. To some critics at the time, the diversity of goals showed the field of ecocriticism to be lacking in a strong theoretical foundation. There was also the concern that academics with a background in literature could not adequately comment on ecological issues. The shift from a discussion of nature to Nature was largely a reaction to two theorists, Dana

Phillips and Timothy Morton, Morton being of particular significance as Buell considers Morton to have brought the field of ecocriticism closer to theory (Buell, 2011, p. 95). Phillips, one of ecocriticism's most prominent critics, published an article entitled "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology" (1999), which was sceptical of what the field of literature could offer to an understanding of ecology. Phillips' concerns were that some ecocritics seemed to be speaking on behalf of Nature, that there was too much of an abandonment of the tradition of theory, and that ecocritics seemed uncomfortable with the notion of Nature as a social construction (Phillips, 1999, p. 578). This and Phillips' subsequent work, *The Truth of Ecology* (2003), provided some valuable but sometimes narrow feedback for the field, homing in on examples and issues that are often not representative of the majority of ecocritical works. Buell is critical of Phillips' work, noting that it "overshoots its mark by denying any legitimacy whatsoever to literature as a conduit of environmental representation" (Buell, 2011, p. 95). Buell states that besides what Phillips' work contributes to a critique of some assumptions of ecological theory, namely first-wave mimesis, the work of Timothy Morton provides a "more nuanced deconstruction of first-wave commitment to 'ecomimesis,' that is, the project of representing nature's complications and internal contradictions" (Buell, 2011, p. 95). Many theorists in the field echo the value of Morton's contributions to ecocriticism, and his works have played a foundational role in the development of the most recent offshoot in the field, material ecocriticism.

Morton was one of the earliest and strongest drivers of capitalising or doing away with the term Nature in the field of ecocriticism, which he began through his text *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007), suggesting that in order to truly engage with ideas of ecology, Nature must be taken out of the discussion. Morton notes that one of the

most significant places where the omission of the idea of Nature must start to come through is in the arts, pointing towards the industry as the place where “fantasies about nature take shape and dissolve” (Morton, 2007, 1). Morton recognizes the arts in all of its forms as a place that can represent the ideas that might seem too large or daunting for an audience to otherwise grasp, and that through this representation the arts can make essential contributions to the ways that ecology, Nature, and ecological crises are perceived. Timothy Clark in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011) contends that ecocriticism, instead of having a particular method, is best defined by its challenges (Clark, 2011, p. 4). One of the main challenges that Clark identifies is that a lot of ecocritical research can be superficial in the way that it claims to be ecocritical simply because it engages with “environmental” topics (Clark, 2011, p.4). The solution that Clark offers is that ecocritics should continue to redefine Nature and build an understanding of the different ways in which Nature has been and might be perceived across time and different cultures. Clark’s work highlights the importance of the focus on shifts in perceptions of Nature – shifts of the kind that this thesis explores.

In 2009, Scott Slovic and Joni Adamson marked the third wave of ecocriticism, which was largely about broadening the field to encompass critics of different ethnicities and nationalities (Marland, 2013, p. 856), but as this wave is considered to bleed into the fourth wave even more than the other waves, I will move onto a discussion of the most recent developments in the field. In the fourth wave of ecocriticism, Timothy Morton and other critics have nurtured notions of the posthuman and postnatural, which have been slowly gaining popularity as the field of ecocriticism has developed. From the mid-1990s, Harold Fromm established the understanding that there was never a Nature or an ‘environment,’ as the separation between the built and Natural spheres is purely ideological (Fromm, 2009, p. 190), and this notion has now

been fostered by a number of ecocritics to become one of the most central concerns of the field.

The call for a revision of the understanding of Nature is widespread across ecocriticism, and can be seen as a foundational part of ecofeminism, with theorists such as Stacy Alimo calling for a material ecocriticism which considers notions of environmental justice, self, and the other through the posthuman (Marland, 2013, p. 856). Material ecocriticism is most strongly supported by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2012) and largely focuses on two methods of reading texts: the first examining how nonhuman aspects of the world are represented in a narrative; and the second examining how narratives can shape the experience of readers, thus creating a cycle where the narrative informs the world and the world informs the narrative (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 79). An important factor in discussions of self, other, and the posthuman is the difference between the current interest in the posthuman and the early interest that approached posthumanism as “after” the human, often through the representation of cyborgs and other mechanical beings (Wolfe, 2010, p. xiii-xv). Interestingly, this development is similar to the ways in which postnaturalism has moved away from being perceived as after Nature and into the decentring of humanity in the ecosystem. The finer points of material ecocriticism start to take shape through adopting this perspective on posthumanism.

Instead of discussing posthumanism as being after humanity, Cary Wolfe’s (2010) notion of posthumanism develops from the period of humanism that saw human beings take centre stage, defying notions of God and Nature to become their own masters. This shift concerns an entirely different subject from the former approach, which Wolfe points to as transhumanism (Wolfe, 2010, p. xiii-xv). Wolfe’s notion of the posthuman acknowledges the discussion of humanism that has shaped the way in which humans perceive themselves and their relation to that around them, and brings the notion of posthumanism into new territory. Wolfe’s understanding of

posthumanism, which is the way that the term will be addressed in this thesis, breaks down the idea that humans are something separate to their world to locate them where they always have been, in an ecology of both biological and technological aspects (Wolfe, 2010, p. xvi). To approach something from an ecocritical and posthuman perspective denies the boundaries between Natural and unNatural aspects of the world, and situates people within this mix, decentring the importance of the human. Timothy Clark (2011, p. 71) suggests that this process removes the idea of Nature and Natural things as being something morally authoritative, demonstrating how conversations of the postnatural stem from posthuman discussion. The decentring of the importance of the human is a major connector among fourth-wave ecocritics. There is currently a strong sense in ecocriticism that humans must be taken off centre stage if they are going to properly acknowledge how they are interconnected and coexist with the world around them. This is complex when considering literature as the medium of the novel is an inherently anthropocentric product. The anthropocentrism of young adult literature introduces further complications, as the genre is scaffolded around the development of the protagonist. The complications at the cross-over between young adult literature and the posthuman or postnatural perspective are discussed in the following chapters and were a foundational part of the revision process for the creative component of this thesis.

Regarding the concern of Nature taking on a sense of moral righteousness, Heather Sullivan's fourth-wave ecocritical notion of "dirt theory" (Sullivan, 2012) provides a way to remove the connotations of morality from Natural and unNatural aspects of the ecosystem. Sullivan's "dirt theory" comes from a position of acceptance of all aspects of the world as having an equal sense of agency, whether that is a tree or a building, a leaf or a particle of air pollution. Sullivan's impetus for this theory came from the fear that green thinking often casts aside the

dirty aspects of built and non-built environments, reinforcing this idea that Nature is a superior and morally authoritative landscape, whereas the human “world” is depraved and dirty (Sullivan, 2012, p. 515). Sullivan provides dirt theory as a solution to this style of thinking, highlighting how there should be no distinction between where humans live and a Natural sphere if co-existence is to be understood (Sullivan, 2012, p. 515). When a person is placed in the context of a larger ecosystem, dirt theory suggests that this person can no longer only think of the things that they affect directly around them. A large part of this approach lies not only in accepting that things such as dirt and pollution are present in our world and are products of the lifestyles of a majority of our species, but also that these elements are extremely mobile. Mobile pollution has the ability to not only travel through space and have a broad effect on the ecosystem, but to also do the same damage through time and have long-reaching effects into the future (Sullivan, 2012, p. 516).

Young adult dystopian fiction is an excellent candidate for exploring notions such as dirt theory due to the relationship between a projection of current concerns and the revision of the language that represents these ideas. Ideas such as dirt theory might be difficult for an individual to accept outright, as pollutants might be very far from what somebody considers to be Nature or a healthy ecosystem. As dystopian fiction is a futuristic and often exaggerated representation of current issues, it opens a space for readers to consider abstract associations and circumstances. Introducing the idea of pollutants and other non-Natural aspects of the world as part of an ecosystem in the dystopian text can therefore begin an acceptance of their presence in the real world and place in the ecosystem of the reader, whether or not this presence is desirable.

An important factor to consider is that ecological crises, either as literary representation or a real world actuality, are not always something that can be physically seen or in some cases

even mentally comprehended. Morton's notion of hyperobjects (2013a, 2013b) addresses this issue, defining these concepts as "massively distributed entities that can be thought and computed, but not directly touched or seen" (Morton, 2013a, p. 37), such as global warming. Hyperobjects require a shift in thinking to be able to comprehend them before moving towards a solution, and can therefore be extremely difficult to perceive and communicate. Hyperobjects also offer interesting material when relating the field to young adult dystopian fiction, as current ecological crises are already difficult to comprehend and will become more complex and abstract in the future. Representing hyperobjects in literature and accompanying these with the corresponding shift in thinking that can act as a tool for comprehending them can assist in this overall understanding of the ways in which these hyperobjects are operating in the real world and how they are being discussed. However, of all of Morton's work, the theory of the *mesh* has been most influential on the field of ecocriticism and this thesis.

Morton's texts *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), *The Ecological Thought* (2010), and *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013a) have provided some much-needed theoretical grounding for ecocriticism. The texts work together closely, as Morton considers *The Ecological Thought* as a prequel to the ideas that he details in *Ecology Without Nature*, and it is in *The Ecological Thought* that he begins to outline a shift away from Nature and towards ecological thinking. Morton begins *The Ecological Thought* in a broad manner, preparing the reader to consider an open-minded approach to what they perceive as ecology, and to remember that ecology should be considered as everything from depression to writing to society itself. This is important for ecocriticism due to the claims of theorists such as Phillips who consider that literary scholars are not qualified to comment on ecological crises. Morton's approach breaks down the barriers between disciplines as much as it does the barriers between

the Natural and unNatural, accepting all parts of the ecosystem and the contributions that these parts make, addressing this collective of concepts as *co-existence* (Morton, 2010, p. 2). By introducing the subject in this inquisitive manner, Morton attempts to change how the reader approaches thinking about ecology and environmental issues.

Morton believes that part of what modern society has done, aside from polluting its world, is to pollute thinking. He states that we not only need to abandon the concept that there is a Nature that is separate from built environments, but also the way that we think about ecology as a whole. He particularly encourages the idea that everybody should be allowed to have thoughts and opinions on the ecosystem (Morton, 2010, p. 4). An early concern that I had when engaging with Morton's work was his idea of hyperobjects, which is a difficult new concept and one that those new to ecological thinking might resist. With discussions of Nature or postnaturalism, we are engaging with the intangible and the subjective. Encouraging an individual to both abandon their life-long relationship with the term Nature and then to consider all aspects of the world as one ecology might be too much of an ideological jump. Individuals who are more inclined towards systems of thought that highlight the seriousness of ecological crises may be comfortable with this jump, but perhaps those who would find even small transitions in this logic difficult to accept, such as climate change deniers for example, may not be so accepting. While a shift to ecological thinking could benefit anybody attempting to comprehend the ecological crises present in our world today, Morton's complete discrediting of Nature and desire for an immediate shift to viewing the world as an expanse of interconnected and co-existing parts of an ecosystem could be one of the failings of his work and a cause for his theories to be rejected. While my own thinking was immediately affected by Morton's ideas, the enormity of what Morton is discussing (and thereby the limited space that he has to talk about even some of these

aspects) might cause individuals to disregard his ideas. Implementing these ideas creatively caused me a similar difficulty, as it was complicated to have my protagonist transition organically from thinking in terms of Natural and nonNatural environments to a more postnatural outlook on the world in the limited space of a novel. However, when Morton's ideas are taken into consideration with others in the field and those who will contribute in the future, I feel that his take on postnaturalism will become as crucial to literary studies, creative writing, and philosophy as pioneering theories in gender, class, and race studies. Morton's discussion on the postnatural is largely centred on his notion of the "mesh," which he feels encompasses the advancements that he makes towards a system of ecological thinking. Exposure to Morton's ecological thinking and the concept of the mesh not only changed the way that I perceive the ecosystem and ecological crises, but the ways that I engage as a reader and writer with artistic media and their representation of the concepts.

Morton's idea of the mesh completely erases the concepts of Nature and environment and anything that is seen to be 'other' or 'away.' An essential part of this interconnectedness is what Morton calls a decentring, as in an ecology all parts affect each other to such a degree that it would be impossible to claim that some are more important than others (Morton, 2010, p. 38). Decentring means that there is not only no centre to the concept of the mesh, but also there are no edges. Significantly, these barriers should also transgress time as actions made now may have far-reaching effects into the future (Morton, 2010, p. 29). Morton does not indicate that thinking in terms of the mesh requires people to perceive all things as equal, as is the case with deep ecology. Rather, he sees the need to understand the degree to which all parts of the ecosystem are interconnected. I noted before that Morton suggested that doing away with Nature is something that can be significantly achieved through the arts, and he further pushes this point with regard to

the mesh and ecological thinking that the arts form a place where people deal with “reality and unreality, being and seeming” (Morton, 2010, p. 11). In this way, Morton not only promotes a tolerance of all perspectives on the ecosystem, but actively encourages contributions from a variety of fields so that they can be in a dialogue with each other. He acknowledges that fields have shortcomings, but can see the benefits in allowing a variety of perspectives to engage and contribute to the discussion of ecological crises and the ecosystem. Morton writes of hopes for the complete integration of ecological issues into everyday thought, so that co-existence and interconnectedness are always something that a reader will consider, even if these notions are not in the foreground of a piece (Morton, 2010, p. 11).

Morton’s notion of the mesh is the foundation for this thesis’s ecocritical-postnatural perspective, and will be referred to throughout the rest of this thesis as interconnectedness and co-existence. Discussing these notions demonstrates the need to shift towards a decentring of human importance so that humans can be ideologically placed back within their ecology, putting readers in a better position to understand the effect that they have on the world around them.

Significance of the Study

This study is situated within young adult dystopian fiction due to the characteristics of the genre and the responsiveness of the field to global change. Children’s and young adult literature is extremely responsive to social and cultural developments and, as John Stephens notes, it has the potential both to be shaped by society and to shape it in turn through the opportunity to make a contribution to the way that its target readership perceives language and ideas (Stephens, 2010, p. 209). As a result, literature for children and young people has the potential to examine how the understanding of a concept changes over time. I acknowledge that no representation of language

or ideas can act as a definite means through which the mind of a reader can be affected. Instead I align with Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic view that language develops through interactions with multiple texts, conversations, and other circumstances. This is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

In offering perspectives on the way that the focus texts can be read as dialogic, I also consider Bakhtin's idea of living discourse, specifically in terms of language – both in the general representation of language and in the specific words or terms used within the bounds of the novels, taking account of their shifting meanings and relationship to other words. Even though readers might not necessarily perceive the evolution of terms within a text in the same way, this thesis will offer perspectives on how these terms are shifting for the protagonists who are formulating their ideas about their world. The thesis will specifically address the ways in which the multiple meanings of terms within the text can be seen as expanding alongside the protagonists' developing understanding of their world and search for a place within it.

This thesis is able to offer new knowledge to the field in two respects. The first of these is a contribution to the theory around and understanding of young adult literature. Reading young adult literature through the lens of ecocriticism is still an emerging aspect of the field, and this thesis aims to assist with the development of these ideas. Several texts have already begun traversing this new territory, such as Alice Curry's *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction* (2013), key chapters in *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* by Claire Bradford, Kerry Mallan, Robyn McCallum, and John Stephens (2008), Noga Applebaum's *Representations of Technology in Science Fiction for Young People* (2010), various works of John Stephens, and the doctoral thesis of Geraldine Massey, *Reading the Environment: Narrative Constructions of Ecological Subjectivities in Australian Children's*

Literature (2009). The contributions of all these texts form the platform for this thesis, which provides a specific examination of the relationship between the postnatural perspective and young adult dystopian fiction. In taking this focus, the thesis aims to contribute to the early development of notions of the postnatural, and what the application of these ideas to young adult dystopian fiction might offer. The genre of young adult dystopian fiction holds a unique opportunity to examine the political, cultural, social, and ecological dimensions of a text at its time of publication and its imagined future scenario, and how readers are positioned in these textual worlds. This thesis uses a postnatural perspective to highlight how reading young adult dystopian fiction through a lens informed by ecological thinking can demonstrate a relationship between the living discourse of shifting language in a text and physical/emotional journey of the protagonist. As the protagonists are exposed to new ways of understanding language, they can be seen as moving towards a more postnatural outlook on the ecosystem and ecological crises

The further contribution to knowledge that this thesis makes is through the creative component. This thesis reworks the knowledge of how concepts from both the primary and secondary literature can be expressed in the form of a creative piece. The scaffold for the creative component came from the investigation of the focus texts with the intention of creating a piece that offers its readership the opportunity to consider a broad spectrum of ecological subjectivities and where they feel that they sit amongst these positions. I acknowledged that readers will not perceive this process in the same way that I did as I was creating the piece, and that they may not read any postnatural notions coming through in my work. However, I based the counternarrative of *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys* on the progression of the protagonist Peace Kelly towards a more postnatural perspective as she came to understand and use the language of her world differently. I aimed to create a fictional work that intentionally uses language in ways

that revise the traditional meanings and affiliations of the specific terms by addressing the problematic parts of the genre that will be discussed over the coming chapters. My intention here was to avoid the potential problems that I perceived when working with the genre of young adult dystopian fiction from a postnatural perspective, and the fourth chapter in this document is an examination of my own text through the same means that I applied to the three focus texts discussed above.

Finally, it was important for me as an aspiring Australian writer to investigate texts that were written and published in Australia. This was a conscious decision for several reasons. The first was that Australian texts are underrepresented in the field of ecocriticism. Aside from Massey's doctoral work, I have not encountered any other study that places a specific focus on Australian examples when examining the crossover between the fields of young adult literature and ecocriticism. This means that this thesis not only provides new knowledge to the field with regard to how the genre can be read through a postnatural lens, but also offers new ways for understanding how the genre might have specific trends in the context of Australian literature.

The second reason was the content itself. Ecology and ecological crises are markedly different all over world. Even though this thesis aims to break down the barriers of different spheres, it also acknowledges the importance of not addressing these ecologies and ecological crises in the same manner. Different regions suffer from distinct and acute issues which were created as a result of different effects on the ecology. To narrow the research to an Australian context is to focus on the types of ecologies and ecological crises that are present in this country. This not only reflects the ecological issues that Australia is currently struggling with, but also highlights how the projections of climate change for the nation differ to other regions of the

world. These specific conditions link to the final reason for this decision, which was based in a comment from Glotfelty and Fromm in *The Ecocriticism Reader*.

Glotfelty and Fromm argue that in the same way that a discussion of feminist literature and criticism must necessarily put a focus on the lives of female authors and the experiences that have shaped them into producing these pieces, the same steps must be taken when addressing literature of ecocriticism (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, xxiii). To understand the location that the author has grown up in and been shaped by is to have insight into the representation of the world of the text. This representation might not be a conscious one, but the ways that terms might be perceived and represented will have been affected by the place in which the author wrote the text. This is not the only factor when examining the literature, as each reader will have their own context for the language used, but it is important to take into consideration when different ecological crises are factored in. I was able to engage in a closer dialogue between the novels than might have been possible with literature from different regions of the world by focussing specifically on fiction produced by Australian authors. These novels are products of the (ecological) trends and issues that these authors have been physically and ideologically exposed to, and an understanding of this background layers more potential meaning to a reading of the texts.

As an aspiring writer from Brisbane, I think that this focus on studying Australian literature is of extreme importance as I write literature that reflects my perception of that place. As is suggested by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), writers are shaped by their context, and I feel that my upbringing in the context of Australia's environmental, political, social, and cultural make-up has had a significant effect on my imagination, and the product that I am putting forward for my readership. This novel is something that I began to write when I was nineteen

and still living in Australia, and is something that has flourished now that I am living in a different country and comparing ways and understandings of life and the ecosystem. Therefore, due to these three reasons, this thesis has narrowed the focus texts to those that were written and published in Australia. Through the opportunity to represent Australian literature more significantly in ecocriticism, to discuss the specific ecological crises that Australia faces, and to highlight the importance of place, this thesis specifically looks at examples of young adult dystopian fiction published in Australia between 2010 and 2015. These decisions have affected the exegetical and creative components that comprise this study, giving the thesis a more specific focus on what a postnatural reading of young adult dystopian fiction might look like.

Summary of Key Terms

The following section offers a summary of the key terms in this thesis. This section aims to remove ambiguity from the rest of the document by giving specific contexts for ecocriticism, postnaturalism, dystopia, young adult fiction, and counternarrative. I acknowledge that each of these terms has a variety of definitions from different perspectives, and that the way in which this thesis uses them is only one potential application. I also understand, as is suggested by the theories of Bakhtin (1981), that language and definitions shift in context as discussion is centred around them. These terms will have different definitions depending on who is examining them, but for this thesis the following definitions apply.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is approached in this study according to the initial foundations put down by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), Buell (1995-2011), and Garrard (2012), as well as in light of the developments of fourth-wave ecocriticism that were discussed above. Therefore, ecocriticism is

understood as something that revolves around the notion that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1995, p. xix), while being conscious that it is always a method of analysis that has implications in politics (Garrard, 2012, pp. 3-4). Ecocriticism is a system of methods and perspectives for examining the representation of not just plants, animals, weather, and landscapes, but also products, people, waste, and cities. This thesis’s application of ecocriticism will be an approach that does not consider the spheres of the built and Natural as separate, but as part of the same mesh or interconnected and co-existing ecology. Ecocriticism is fundamental to this study because it enables a discussion that challenges understandings of Nature, thus providing a more intimate understanding of how aspects of the world connect and engage.

Postnatural

Postnatural is used in this thesis to refer to a revised understanding of how the aspects of the world interconnect and coexist, not in reference to a time when Natural elements of the world no longer exist. This thesis will not refer to postnaturalism as the manipulation of or domination over Nature, as in William McKibben’s original usage of the term. Furthermore, this thesis will not discuss Nature as something “over yonder” (Morton, 2010, p. 3). The context for postnaturalism will thereby contribute to current discussions that decentre humans and resituate them back in the ecosystem with no centre or edges. These notions are based on the work of Timothy Morton and how all parts of the world can be perceived as an interconnected and co-existing ecosystem. The perspective of the postnatural enables a position from which to discuss representations in the literature and the creative piece without further adding to the homogenised and false notion of Nature.

Dystopia

Lyman Tower Sargent (1994) provided much of the foundation for the definition of and distinction between utopia, dystopia and their other forms. Sargent defines Utopia/outopia, meaning *no* or *not place* (1994, p. 5), as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived” (Sargent, 1994, p. 9). Dystopia, the *bad place* (Sargent, 1994, p. 5), has a replica definition to utopia but with the distinction that the society is to be viewed by a contemporary reader as worse than the one in which they live (Sargent, 1994, p. 9). In their text *Dark Horizons*, Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan outline what they term as “specific formal strategies” (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 5) that distinguish a dystopia from a utopia. A dystopia can often be immediately distinguished from a utopia in the initial setup of the characters and the world, as a utopia will establish the protagonist as a visitor to a strange land and the dystopian protagonist will already be a citizen of the society (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p. 5). This dystopian protagonist will then begin to go through a journey of oppression and resistance known as *counternarrative* as they begin to uncover the secrets of their society and become aware of other ways of living. These mechanics are crucial to my thesis as they are what gives this genre the ability to provide an abstract space to put forward postnatural ideas that can still be easily applied to the author’s or reader’s world.

Young adult dystopian fiction

The work that has most significantly shaped my understanding of young adult dystopia is *New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature* (Bradford et. al., 2008). The authors note that children’s texts are “highly responsive to social change” (Bradford et. al., 2008, p. 2) and

that in fiction for children and young adults, dystopia is often present as tropes (Bradford et. al., 2008, p.12). For this thesis, the genre provides an opportunity to examine how notions of Nature can be perceived within the literature, and some scaffolding for representation of notions of postnaturalism through the notion of tropes. Also, Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry's (2003) work provides the insight that young adult dystopian fiction can teach young people about the nature of society and of one's place within it (Hintz & Ostry, 2003, p. 1), including the loss of innocence when the protagonist uncovers the more sinister aspects of their society (Hintz & Ostry, 2003, p. 9). This thesis approaches young adult dystopian fiction as offering tropes and themes that follow a young adult protagonist who lives in a society intended to be worse than the readers' world and who comes to understand their place within this world as they uncover the faults in their society.

Counternarrative

The way in which the protagonist comes to understand the sinister aspects of their society is a well-documented exchange between the narrative of the governing system and the *counternarrative* of the protagonist. Baccolini and Moylan (2003) define this as a process whereby the dystopian state, which often enforces a particular sort of language, is resisted by the protagonist who uses language in an anti-social way (pp. 5-6). As this process of resistance and domination progresses, the protagonist is exposed to others who resist or have resisted the system, and therefore to memories and notions of other ways of living (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, pp. 5-6). For the purposes of this thesis, counternarrative is referred to as the struggle between the protagonist and the dystopian state as the protagonist uncovers the corrupt aspects of their society, resists, and is opened to ways of living outside of their context of the world. This process occurs as the protagonist comes to understand new meanings for concepts that were

previously monologic, or ones that had been purposefully hidden from the public.

Counternarrative provides a structure by which to observe how the representations of aspects of the world change, and how this can have a relationship to the development of the protagonist.

Aim of the Study

In light of the definitions and background to the theory that has been discussed in this chapter, the following aim guides this study:

To investigate from an ecocritical-postnatural perspective how Australian young adult dystopian fiction can be read as engaging with the idea that all elements of the ecosystem are interconnected and co-exist, and the narrative potential that this offers.

The study will ask:

1. How are notions of interconnectedness and coexistence represented throughout the course of the narrative trajectory?
2. What is the relationship between the shifting representation of interconnectedness and coexistence and the protagonist's actions and consciousness with respect to a developing postnatural awareness?
3. What does a postnatural perspective offer young adult dystopian fiction?

Methodology

As noted earlier, this thesis follows a dialogic approach based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). As the study progressed, both the exegetical and creative components informed each other and refined the scope of the study. Bakhtin's work is appropriate for the purpose of this thesis, as it works with what he refers to as "living discourse" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 260) or "socially heteroglot language" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 288), the ways in which a term or concept is being altered and challenged as opposed to having a static definition. Aside from the obvious understanding of the term 'Nature,' which is often referred to in this thesis, this notion applies to the way living discourse in the novels describes and represents both human and nonhuman aspects of the ecosystem. All references to plants, buildings, animals, people, weather, pollution and all other aspects of the ecosystem need to go under the same revision as the concept of Nature in order to break down the notion that parts of the ecosystem are somehow separate or have different value. This thesis consciously engages with the words that represent these parts of the ecosystem in the context of their living discourse and their place in an ecosystem of coexistence and interconnectedness.

Bakhtin's discussion of dialogism in relation to the novel begins with his identification of the novel as "multiform in style and variform in speech and tone" (Bakhtin, 1981, 262) due to the multiplicity of voices and positions including the author, characters and genre conventions. Additionally, every word that an author includes in their novel already has multiple definitions, meanings and contexts for the reader before they experience that novel (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 278). This dialogic relationship is particularly important in the case of words that the author wishes to be read from an open or revised perspective. This presented a significant challenge for me as a writer wanting to revise the representation of words for various parts of the ecosystem, as I

needed to find a means to actively disorient or displace the reader and have them open to this terminology as living discourse. Bakhtin comments on how in a speaker-listener context, the listener is always striving to place the utterances of the speaker into the specific contexts of the circumstance, but how when the word is an object without a speaking context, as in a novel, the interpretation has a lot more potential to be random or influenced by prior understanding (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282). This dialogic approach highlights two important aspects of this thesis: (i) the acknowledgement of the multiple meanings and definitions of language within the selected texts, and (ii) the representation of language from an ecocritical-postnatural perspective involving a perpetual process of removing familiar contexts and definitions.

As the creative component and the exegesis are separate but connected documents, I employed specific dialogic strategies that reflected my engagement with theory. The incorporation of theory into the novel largely operates through the counternarrative, as this literary device allows for the protagonist and the reader to be exposed to the shifting meanings of significant terms in the novel. This specific use of living discourse was paired with the development of the protagonist Peace Kelly towards a more postnatural perspective. The process was observed in the focus texts when they were read through a postnatural lens. However, aside from this strategy there are also specific dialogic techniques that were incorporated into the creative work to further highlight the dialogic foundation of language and its representation: the use of multiple narrators and multi-stranded narration (Bradford et. al., 2008, pp. 25-26; McCallum, 1999, p. 10). These strategies were utilised in the creative component to increase the potential meanings of the represented language as these terms were coming from characters with different sets of experiences and ideologies.

By telling a story from the perspective of two or more narrators who are experiencing different events, the representation of multiple ideological perspectives has the potential to challenge the notion that any of these perspectives can serve as a perfect or whole outlook on the world. When approaching the postnatural from a dialogic perspective, it is possible to not only address words and terms that are used to represent ecology and ecological crises, but also the underlying ideologies that are attached to these concepts. Having multiple narrators and multi-stranded narration challenging the representation of notions within the novel provides an opportunity for terms and concepts to be perceived from a variety of perspectives instead of a monologic one. This is a particularly useful tool when writing in the genre of dystopia as using multiple narrators provides the opportunity to have narrators from within and outside the dystopian system. By using specific language for these different narrative arcs, an author can create a dissonance in the representation of a concept, and then follow this development as the protagonist resists the language of the dystopian authority and begins to be exposed to other ways of understanding the world. Through representing these characters as forming their understanding of the world, none of these perspectives or usages of language is depicted as dominant or superior, thereby enabling the reader to incorporate all of these factors into the ways that they perceive the terms and ideologies within the text.

As a protagonist in dystopian fiction breaks away from a fixed, monologic understanding of language and the ideological perspectives attached to this language, so too can the reader examine, revise and expand upon their own understandings of the world and their place within it. Therefore, the combination of dialogism and postnaturalism, when specifically applied to the genre of young adult dystopian fiction, opens up multiple usages of terms and ideologies to be represented in a text without any of these being presented as better than others. This works with

Morton's concept of postnaturalism, which accepts all elements of the ecosystem as co-existing. Together, dialogism and postnaturalism afford an opportunity to examine the interactions between terms and ideologies regarding the ecosystem within a text, and the ways that these terms and ideologies can connect to contexts outside of the literature.

Overview of Selected Texts

The three focus texts for the study can be read as offering protagonists who start out with a monologic perspective of their world and their place within it, and then shift to a more dialogic and postnatural understanding as the counternarrative progresses. These texts do not have multiple narrators, but utilise language as living discourse, asking the reader to formulate new contexts for words and concepts relating to co-existence and interconnectedness. These new contexts build towards the more postnatural perspective that the protagonists arrive at by the conclusion of the novels, and provide a platform for their (and by implication the readers') exposure to postnatural ideas through the shifts in the use of language.

Although several terms have been given a new context in *Days Like This*, the three main terms are the "Wall," "harvesting," and "the Committee." The "ideal" reader would be familiar with how these terms can take on a greater context than their standard definition due to their evolving usage across times of historical, political and technological changes, as well as in science fiction and fantasy novels. In history, there are many examples of walls being built as a way to separate people, such as the Berlin Wall, Hadrian's Wall, and the Mexico-United States Barrier. Similarly, harvesting is a commonly used term in science fiction which takes on a different meaning from its more familiar agricultural meaning, for example, organ harvesting

from corpses in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Philip Reeve's *A Darling Plain* of the *Mortal Engines* (2001-2006) series, where the word is used to describe the burrowing city of Harrowbarrow, which swallows cities despite a treaty. Divergence from the typical definitions of these terms provides an opportunity for the reader to consider their current understanding of them and how this new meaning operates within the bounds of the novel and links with or disrupts their previous experiences of this word. In the context of *Days Like This*, the Wall serves the dual purpose of keeping certain groups of people out of the city, and others in. The citizens who are on the outside of the Wall are those who cannot afford the resources from the food-production factories and the water moon, a mechanical system that has become the main source of water due to unreliable rainfall as a result of global warming. Even after paying for a secure lifestyle, families must sign their children up for either the breeding or the harvesting program when they are of an appropriate age. In order to make parents feel less emotionally attached to their children and make this process possible, they have medication forced upon them. Medication is also forced on young people to prepare their bodies for conceiving, or to increase the production of their pituitary glands in preparation for these fluids to be harvested. Harvesting eventually kills the teenager but provides the essential component for a serum that stops the ageing process in the rest of the city's population. These processes are all overseen and enforced by the Committee, the dystopian authority in this world. The context of these terms within this novel affect the representation of co-existence and interconnectedness as the protagonist comes to comprehend her previously limited understanding of the world, her intended place in it, and the life that she wants to attain.

Although the protagonist of *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* also begins the novel from a monologic perspective, it is a perspective from outside of the dystopian society and not one

that solely privileges human interests. The significant terms that are explored within this novel are “the Machine,” “the Balance,” and “Illegals.” Ashala and her Tribe of fellow Illegals have rejected the dystopian society and begun a life together in the First Wood. The designation “Illegals” refers to the status of the refugees, as these young people have escaped cities where they would have been locked up for possessing various powers. The treatment of these people can be seen as similar to that of “boat people” who have attempted to seek refuge in the real-world Australia over the last twenty years. The life of the Illegals is based on an agreement with both the trees in their forest and gigantic lizards called Saur, ensuring that their behaviour does not mirror the effects that humans have previously had on the world outside of the cities. This was a disturbance of what is referred to as “the Balance,” which is represented as a harmonious ecosystem. As a result of disturbance to the Balance in the past, most of the cities run on laws that forbid a certain level of technology from being developed, but a rebellious faction of the dystopian society is seeking to resume use of technology, beginning with a device called “the Machine.” Ashala’s interrogation by the Machine, which mines and manipulates her memories, is the journey by which she comes to accept and even defend the Machine, recognising the role that technology has to play in her world. As with the Wall and harvesting in *Days Like This*, the word “machine” has been widely used in science fiction in the past, such as in E. M. Forster’s *The Machine Stops* (1909), where humanity is entirely reliant on a machine for all of its needs. The shifting in the use of the Machine in *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* is particularly interesting for the purposes of a thesis on postnaturalism, as it involves a character who is staunchly anti-technology coming to love and defend this machine, bringing it with her when she returns to the Firstwood.

Finally, in *The Big Dry*, I will focus on the terms “Welfare,” “wet countries,” and “food” as well as the subtle use of familiar words such as “dirt,” “grit,” “dust,” “grime” and “sand.” In the context of the novel, daily life has become a struggle due to sandblasters and drought, but it becomes increasingly more complicated for the protagonist George and his brother Beeper when their father does not return from a food run. As the protagonist is only thirteen years old, he is used to his household duties and protocol when sandblasters arrive, but is totally unprepared for looking after himself and his younger brother when their father goes missing. After this point in the story, Welfare is introduced as a force that might remove the protagonist’s brother as there is no adult in the house. The context for food changes from something that is scarce to the limited supply that they have in the house, and the wet countries become both something of fantasy in his stories to his brother as well as something which starkly represents class structures in the text. These new responsibilities continue to shape the context of a world without the protagonist’s father, and require George to expand his understanding as a matter of survival.

In each of these texts, three key terms will be focussed on to show how the shifting in the meaning of these terms throughout the novel can be connected with the progression of the protagonist to what can be perceived as a more postnatural understanding of their world. As each protagonist’s understanding and usage of these terms shifts, so does the protagonist’s understanding of their world and their place within it, along with their acknowledgement (if not acceptance) of the behaviours and ideologies in their world. The shifting contexts that language is used in will also be factored according to the problematic aspects when the genre of young adult dystopian fiction is read from a postnatural perspective.

Exegesis Overview

Chapter 2 provides a review of the key academic texts that form the theoretical basis for this work, as well as additional novels that shaped the process but were not included in the analysis. This chapter introduces the four key issues that are identified in this thesis when examining young adult dystopian fiction from a postnatural perspective, and also suggests ways that the effect of these issues might be lessened.

In Chapter 3, *Days Like This*, *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, and *The Big Dry* are examined for the ways in which significant terms in the novel shift and how this can be read as being connected to the development of the protagonist towards a more postnatural perspective. Within this chapter, the problems and solutions from Chapter 2 are discussed where applicable, as well as how this process affected the creation and drafting of the creative component *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys*.

Chapter 4 applies the same process from the previous chapter to the creative component for this thesis. Similarly, it factors the problems and solutions that were identified in the second chapter and how these affected the development of my young adult dystopian novel. This chapter completes the dialogue between these documents and demonstrates the ways in which the exegetical and creative components of this thesis affected each other as they were developed.

Finally, Chapter 5 is a short conclusion of the work that summarises the relationship between each of these documents and how they connect with the creative component.

Summary

This chapter has located this study in the fields of ecocriticism and young adult dystopian fiction, highlighting the key concepts that will inform this thesis. Using a dialogic methodology, the thesis examines three examples of Australian young adult dystopian fiction from a postnatural perspective. This thesis argues that shifting contexts for terms within a text is a crucial device that helps to shape the representation of the protagonist's development of a more postnatural perspective or subjectivity. Counternarrative acts as a way of mapping the relationship between the protagonist's development and the shifting definitions of terms when reading through a postnatural lens. The next two chapters investigate shifting terms and postnaturalism through examining the counternarratives of the focus texts and the ways that the process of reading these focus texts from a postnatural perspective provided insight for the drafting of the creative component. Shifting language challenges the underlying, monologic ideologies associated with these words, providing a platform for a dialogic and postnatural understanding of the world. In examining these texts and producing an example of the genre, this thesis highlights how the application of postnatural ideas to the genre of young adult dystopian fiction can be part of a conversation about ecology and ecological issues in Australia.

Chapter 2: Young Adult Literature and an Ecocritical Perspective: Issues and Techniques

As postnaturalism is still a developing area of the field of ecocriticism, relatively few scholarly works have applied a postnatural lens to reading or writing young adult literature. Aside from Curry's text (2013), there has been no extensive work done in bringing a postnatural perspective to young adult literature. However, there has been a significant amount of material published which applies an ecocritical perspective to young adult literature. From this work, this chapter will discuss the four key texts which shaped the theoretical underpinning of this thesis: Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens, and Robyn McCallum's *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* (2008), Alice Curry's *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth* (2013), Geraldine Massey's doctoral thesis *Reading the Environment: Narrative Constructions of Ecological Subjectivities in Australian Children's Literature* (2009), and Noga Applebaum's *Representations of Technology in Science Fiction for Young People* (2010). These texts provide a platform for both the exegetical and creative work for this thesis, as they served as reference for how young adult literature could be critiqued and generated from an ecocritical perspective.

The four key texts discussed above gave direction as to how I could examine young adult fiction from a postnatural perspective, which shaped the analysis in Chapters 3 and 4. These texts identify a variety of issues that arise when applying an ecocritical perspective to young adult fiction, and this chapter will focus on four of these issues: the romantic association between the

child and Nature, the protagonist as saviour, the anthropocentrism of young adult literature, and the juxtaposing of Nature and technology. In investigating these four issues, the chapter also considers techniques that might provide some balance in the crossover between ecocriticism and young adult literature, as well as how these issues and corresponding techniques could apply in the context of a postnatural reading of young adult fiction. After briefly introducing each of these issues and countering techniques, the chapter will give a more detailed discussion of how these issues and techniques might operate within texts.

Overview of Issues

The following section discusses four potential issues to consider when applying an ecocritical perspective to young adult literature. These issues were determined through an engagement with the key academic texts noted above.

Romantic Association between Child and Nature

The first potential issue from an ecocritical perspective is the Romantic affiliation between the child and Nature, which is still prevalent in young adult fiction. In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton dedicated a third of his text to an investigation of how the literature of the Romantic period represents Nature, as he feels that this period still influences the way that ecology is imagined (Morton, 2007, p. 1). This damaging representation not only applies to Nature but also to perceptions of children, with both Nature and children being depicted as pure, “natural,” and somewhat “other” to the adult world. Curry explores Patrick J. Ryan’s studies of some of the categories that adults have placed children in (Ryan, 2008, p. 555-556), namely: “the authentic child (natural, biological), the political child (cultural, historical) and the conditioned child (ideological, symbolic)” (Curry, 2013, p. 8). The authentic child is a problematic category

when examining young adult literature from an ecocritical or postnatural perspective as it is affiliated with these Romantic notions of purity and “naturalness.” Curry identifies how contemporary authors have moved towards representations of the political child protagonist, as opposed to an authentic child protagonist; the former being more conducive to an ecocritical or postnatural reading. The representation of a protagonist as an authentic child risks a reading of this protagonist as connected by instinct to the Natural world, but with little capacity to understand ecological crises from a rational and practical perspective. This results in the character running away to Nature seeking refuge, which is not an option if the world in the text is depicted as being ravaged by climate change. While a political child might feel less of an inherent sense of a “connection” with Nature, this protagonist would be better equipped to understand ecological crises due to their comprehension of social and historical context. A postnatural reading of a text with a political child as the protagonist would identify this character as being more capable of understanding how the parts of their world are interconnected and co-exist, but a truly postnatural child would have no specific connection to the spheres of Nature or humanity, instead viewing every part of their ecosystem in a delicate balance.

Child as Saviour

The second issue is the potential for representing the young protagonist as having the capacity to save the world, a position that is implied as desirable for the reader of this fiction. In *New World Orders*, Bradford et al. discuss their concerns around this issue, noting that “the positioning of children as audience for an appeal to “‘help save the rain forests’ is rather meaningless in itself, apart from whatever consciousness-raising effect it might have” (Bradford et. al., 2008, p. 96), which raises the issue of how an implied reader might perceive notions of ecology and ecological collapse at the conclusion of the text. In one regard, the reader may feel

that ecological crises are easily solved. Another potential issue is that after reading this fiction a reader might feel dejected by the sense of not being capable of achieving the same feats as the protagonist. The technique that is presented in *New World Orders* as a counter to this issue is to focus on small-scale communities and practical action in young adult literature (Bradford et al., 2008, pp. 96-97). With a focus on these small-scale communities and practical action, there is a potential to offer readers a position that they would be capable of taking on themselves in the real world. From a postnatural perspective, this would offer a position which enables an understanding of how the parts of the ecosystem are interconnected, and how a person can be consciously engaged in that connection.

Anthropocentrism

As a cultural medium that is produced and consumed by humans, literature is inherently anthropocentric. In the genre of young adult literature, there is also a predominance of human-centred maturation narratives, which give way to further anthropocentrism in these texts (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 91). Nevertheless, it is possible to provide the reader with a variety of ecological subject positions through such techniques as having multiple narrators and/or multi-stranded narration. Texts that incorporate these techniques provide the opportunity for the reader to be exposed to a range of perspectives and opinions. Exposure to this range of opinions can potentially lead to a more balanced understanding of the ideologies to which the reader does or does not subscribe (Massey, 2009, p. 217). Therefore, to counteract the purely anthropocentric medium of literature, a variety of ecological subject positions can be put forward for a reader to consider. Furthermore, providing a spectrum of ecological subject positions for a reader to engage with increases the opportunity for the reader to consider how a spectrum of ideologies

and perspectives on ecology and ecological crisis can co-exist, and thereby the reader can arrive at a more postnatural understanding of the world of the text.

Nature versus Technology

The final issue is the juxtaposing of Nature and technology, and how this process can position readers to view technology in a negative way. This notion is discussed in Applebaum's text, in which she argues that starkly juxtaposing Nature and technology could potentially turn young people away from technology in a time where they will increasingly rely on technology in order to live a sustainable life (Applebaum, 2009, p. 19). Applebaum investigates a number of young adult texts and categorises the various societies that they represent before examining how different types of societies are juxtaposed within one novel. Applebaum stresses the importance of not positioning one of these styles of society as superior to another, but of instead representing a variety of styles of living and ideologies as part of a system that can function together (Applebaum, 2009, p. 38). Therefore, in order to balance this final issue, technology can be represented as something that does not only operate in a sustainable society, but is perhaps even crucial to it.

These four issues and their corresponding techniques are important considerations when performing an ecocritical analysis of young adult fiction, as they highlight some of the key crossover points between the representation of Nature and the development of the young adult protagonist. Understanding how these concepts can be read as operating in young adult literature and the potential positions that these texts might offer for a reader demonstrates how the text can be read as offering certain representations of ecology and ecological crises. Each of these issues remains crucial to consider when reading from a postnatural perspective, as the authentic child,

the protagonist as saviour, limited ecological subjectivities, and the juxtaposing of Nature and technology all create boundaries between groups of people and parts of the world. Since this thesis defines postnaturalism as the theory exploring ways in which barriers between parts of the world can be broken down, these issues are less compatible with a postnatural reading of a text and the ways in which a text can be centred around a postnatural perspective. The four issues and their corresponding techniques will now be explored in greater detail, as well how the consideration or incorporation of these techniques can engage a reader or author in a postnatural experience with literature and writing.

Representations of Nature in Young Adult Fiction

In his article, *From Eden to Suburbia: Perspectives on the Natural World in Children's Literature* (2006), Stephens examines representations of Nature in children's literature between 1983 and 2004 and finds that after the 1980s, there were three key representations of Nature in literature for children and young adults: mastery over Nature; humans as outsiders caring for Nature; and humans as having no status over other living things (Stephens, 2006, p. 40). These three perspectives are still prevalent in ecocritical discussions, both inside and outside of the context of literature for children and young adults, and form a standard for much of the way that these representations are explored by the academic texts that are discussed in this chapter.

In *Reading the Environment: Narrative Constructions of Ecological Subjectivities in Australian Children's Literature* (Massey, 2009), Massey discusses environmental subject positions in children's literature along the spectrum that ranges from anthropocentrism (similar to Stephens' mastery over nature) to ecocentrism (where humans are not considered as superior or other life forms). In *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian*

Transformations (Bradford et al., 2008) these ideological perspectives are addressed as anthropocentrism and biocentrism (biocentrism is discussed in the same vein as ecocentrism in Massey's thesis). The majority of discussion about Nature and the environment in *New World Orders* occurs in their chapter titled *Reweaving Nature and Culture: Reading Ecocritically*, which provides insight into the anthropocentrism of children's and young adult literature (discussed later in this chapter). Similarly, Alice Curry's text *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction* (2013) discusses anthropocentrism and how this perspective connects with and has been revised by theories of ecofeminism. In the chapter "But Only God Can Make a Tree," from her text *Representations of Technology in Science Fiction for Young People* (2010), Applebaum examines the depiction of Nature in young adult science fiction according to three ideological platforms which she arrived at through an examination of theoretical models situated in the current environmental debate: mechanism (an overt reliance on technology and a control over or disregard of nature), naturalism (located in Natural environments with no or extremely limited technology) and equilibrium (where humans coexist with Nature and use technology without harming the environment) (Applebaum, 2010, p. 25). Each of these texts engages with the representations discussed by Stephens in *From Eden to Suburbia* to some degree, and they are an important consideration when applying an ecocritical perspective to young adult literature.

Although categorising these representations of Nature can be useful when comparing societies and texts, this method of analysis can also be restrictive. Even when societies and individuals are placed on a spectrum of these concepts as opposed to defined "boxes," there is still the implication that some perspectives are better than others. This kind of value judgment does not have a place in a postnatural analysis, as the aim of the approach is not to make suggestions about ways of life, but to break down the barriers between parts of the ecosystem.

Timothy Morton rejects the terms anthropocentrism, ecocentrism and biocentrism, and argues that instead of “pushing around preformed pieces of thought” (Morton, 2007, p. 7) he chooses to create his own meanings. This thesis will examine how certain ecological subject positions are represented to the reader as desirable, but it will not categorise these into anthropocentric or biocentric terms. Instead, it will examine the opportunity that postnaturalism provides, with the chance to factor all of these perspectives and the ways that they are interconnected and can co-exist. Even when ideologies are in conflict with each other, this does not necessarily mean that it is imperative that one or the other is discarded or dismissed. By examining the perspectives that a postnatural reading of a text offers, we can see that a postnatural reading can offer an awareness of, and tolerance for, subject positions that a reader might not normally adopt. I will now provide some insight into the sets of issues and techniques that have been discussed in accordance to the secondary literature, and the role that a postnatural reading can play in this dynamic.

The Authentic Child and the Political Child

The representation of Nature in children’s and young adult literature is problematic for many reasons, and, as noted above, one of these is due to the Romantic connection between children and Nature. Stephens examines how most children’s texts that represent the environment or aspects of ecology can be categorized under the second of his ideological perspectives, namely, that humans are still separate from Nature, but are in awe of it and view it as a “source of value and meaning” (Stephens, 2006, p. 40). This viewpoint might initially be perceived as a positive representation, and one that puts forward positions that encourage conservation and ecologically-motivated lifestyle choices. However, viewing Nature in this capacity not only separates Nature from the “world” of humans but also paints it as something mystical that cannot be fully

comprehended. In the Romantic period, children were associated with this “pure” Nature as it was represented that children were better able to understand and connect with Nature on a primal level. One facet of ecocriticism which discusses notions of Romantic representations of Nature and children is ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism is an approach based on attacking the binary opposites present in patriarchal ideologies that subjugate the positions of women, children, and Nature. Curry’s discussion of the Romantic perception of the child and Nature and how these positions have been revised over time occurs within the context of her exploration of ecofeminism. She details the linkage between the representation of women, children and Nature as positions which have been historically represented as not having agency, therefore having the potential to be collaboratively revised (Curry, 2013, p. 7). In discussing how this perception has developed over time, Curry examines the dual representation of the “natural” child, through notions of innocence and harmony, and a corresponding attribution to Nature as childish, wild and simplistic (Curry, 2013, p. 7). Both children and Nature were represented in the Romantic period as pure, juxtaposed with the behaviour and ideologies of human adulthood. In examining Ryan’s tenets of childhood, Curry considers the positions of the authentic child, the political child, and the ideological child (Curry, 2013, p. 8), concluding that the authentic child belongs to the Romantic notion of the past, while the political child is the current position favoured by contemporary authors (Curry, 2013, p. 8).

The political child represents the child as empowered, having a sense of agency and “capable of moral and social action” (Curry, 2013, p. 8), a definite shift away from the assumed innocence of Romantic representations. This position has enormous potential for what Applebaum (2010) regards as the current environmental debate, as young readers now have the

opportunity to be presented with subject positions and information through literature that can contribute to the formation of their ecological outlook. The political child is also a position that combines well with a postnatural perspective, as this style of protagonist is better suited to being able to draw connections between parts of their ecosystem and make their own conclusions about these connections. This political child, who is informed by culture and history, will have access to the conversations that will enable them to gain context for their world, as well as the ways that it operates and changes. These conversations will arm the political child with more language than the authentic child, whose Romantic notions make the child attached to instinct and inherent truths. When it comes to a broader conception of the ecosystem and how its parts interact, it is the position of the political child that can achieve a more postnatural perspective. How readers actually take up this position is of course unknown, but it has the potential for raising readers' developing eco-consciousness.

In offering readers a more politically-informed ecological position in young adult dystopian fiction, texts often draw on utopian and dystopian conventions as tropes, such as how the traditionally dark conclusion of adult dystopian fiction is left on an open and hopeful note in young adult dystopian fiction. Similarly, representations of ecology and ecological crises might appear more as world-building details than as dominant themes, such as making references to a warmer climate and how this affects the young adult's life, instead of a focus on how ecological crisis arose and what the protagonist plans to do about it.

In texts for young people, discussion of positive environmental policy or positions often takes form through metonymy and analogy in utopian fiction, and absence or loss in dystopian fiction (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 80). This allusiveness links well with Morton's hopes that even when a text is not explicitly about ecology and ecological issues these symbols or absences will

spark in the mind of the reader a need for a conversation, just as a society depicted without women would call for a feminist enquiry (Morton, 2007, p. 5). Readers might not be presented with detailed information about the environmental crises in the texts, but the allusion to these issues through tropes has the capacity to provoke thoughts and questions that may lead to connections with the reader's own world. This shift away from earlier, more didactic examples of children's and young adult literature requires the reader to make inferences by engaging with the notions and perspectives within the text. Due to this process of inference, readers might not be given a complete scope of environmental issues, but a piece of the puzzle that can contribute to the development of opinions about ecology the ecological crises (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 90). By being exposed to a variety of texts regarding different ecological issues, readers will be presented with the opportunity to track a conversation between these materials and bring them together to receive a more complete picture than any one book could believably portray.

All dystopian fiction revolves around a representation of current issues in society through the projection of how these might play out in other future times and places. Representing the protagonist as a political child in this genre would be more effective than the representation of an authentic child, as the political child would engage with the patterns of resistance marked in the counternarrative due to their context of culture and history. As a part of her exploration of the representation of technology in young adult science fiction, Applebaum (2010) examines sixteen novels² published over a 22-year period for how they represent the relationships among the

² Monica Hughes' *Devil on My Back* (1984), Alison Prince's *The Others* (1986), Peter Dickinson's *Eva* (1988), Caroline Macdonald's *The Lake at the End of the World* (1988), Deborah Moulton's *Children of Time* (1989), Gregory Maguire's *I Feel Like the Morning Star* (1989), Stephen Bowkett's *The Wintering* trilogy: *Ice*, *Storm* and *Thaw* (2001–2002), Jeanne DuPrau's *The City of Ember* (2004), Tom Browne's *Red Zone* (1980), Brenda Vale's *Albion* (1982), Robert Westall's *Futuretrack 5* (1989), Isabelle Carmody's *Scatterlings* (1995), Janet McNaughton's *The Secret under My Skin* (2000), Julie Bertagna's

characters, Nature and technology. Applebaum begins by discussing the representation of the child and Nature in young adult science fiction, and suggests that the content of the genre should cause it to be the kind of literature that challenges the affiliation of the child and Nature. However, Applebaum found that many of the texts “reveal the enduring, if not retrogressive, influence of the earliest theories of childhood” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 19), returning to the representations of the Romantic period. Applebaum marks this representation as not only out-dated, but potentially damaging as it perpetuates obsolete perceptions of young people while drawing parallels between the ideologies and practices of the world of the text, and those of the contemporary world of the readers. By representing the child or young person as close to Nature, and Nature and technology as being polar opposites, a position is offered that young people should be resistant to, or wary of, technology. Applebaum expresses concern about the potential effects of this ‘anti-tech’ representation. As the world currently has not effectively reduced its carbon output, depicting technology as something destructive is a regressive and harmful position to be offering to young people. Running away to the wilderness and leading primitive lifestyles is not enough to slow the effects of climate change, and to turn young people away from the role that technology has to play in this equation is ecologically irresponsible (Applebaum, 2010, p. 19). For these reasons, the shift to Curry’s notion of the political child is important for supporting agency, as well as for more accurately reflecting the current environmental situation in which readers are inevitably involved. Therefore, an essential process in examining or creating a text from a postnatural perspective is to move away from the authentic or Romantic child (who is saved by fleeing to Nature) towards the position of the political child (who takes action). The political child will become involved in discussion and events that

Exodus (2002), H.M. Hoover’s *Another Heaven, Another Earth* (1983) and Grace Chetwin’s *Collidescope* (1990).

privilege greater ecological awareness and interconnectedness, as opposed to running away and rejecting a wider comprehension of the parts of their world.

Applebaum's argument is that young adult science fiction has the potential to change technophobic representation, and this thesis contends that there is an even greater opportunity for this shift in young adult dystopian fiction. Of all of the genres of young adult fiction, dystopian fiction is the best equipped for dealing with the representation of the current environmental crisis in a way that is abstract enough to avoid panic but informative enough to offer the reader a critique of their own society. However, when representing a political child who comprehends the state of things around them and takes action based on these judgements, there is the potential to represent the protagonist as the sole catalyst for change.

The Protagonist as Saviour, Small-Scale Communities and Practical Action

While representing the protagonist as a political child might offer positions that will be more engaging to a modern readership, it is unrealistic and undesirable to depict this character as the sole saviour of the fictional world. As young adult literature focuses on the implied relationship of a young protagonist in dialogue with the intended readership of young people, expecting that this character or this readership will be able to entirely heal a broken world is unreasonable (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 84). This is particularly the case when the texts consider large-scale notions such as saving the rainforests or tackling climate change. Stephens discusses this notion, acknowledging that texts which only operate with large-scale ideas might have the effect of consciousness raising for the readership, provoking thought about environmental issues in young adult readers, but offer little else for the readership (Stephens, 2006, p. 43). Many examples of young adult dystopian fiction focus on the notion of one "person" (the protagonist) no matter

how young, making a difference, but the possibility of the readership being able to achieve similar goals is unlikely at best. Within the pages of the novel, the protagonist's triumphs allow for the readership to feel a sense of empowerment. However, once the reader has completed the text there is the potential for the reader to feel unmotivated or disenchanted about their potential for involvement in ecological issues due to the representation of these actions as too grand. This particularly creates problems for interactions with young adult dystopian fiction, mainly due to the intended tone as these novels draw to a close.

Dystopian fiction is intended as a warning to the reader about current trends in their own world that might become more dire situations in the future if action is not taken. Although dystopian fiction written for adults often ends on a note of despair, dystopian fiction for young adults usually offers a sense of hope in the final pages of the text. If the intention of the genre is to warn readers of how current issues might be magnified in the future, there is a disconnect if this warning ends with the reader feeling as if they are not capable of making any real difference. If a text can inspire or empower a reader during their reading with the notion of their being capable of changing the world, then the return to the enormity of problems in the real world after the novel is finished may be counterproductive in warning the reader about the necessity of action to deal with ecological crises. Readers may leave this text and give very little consideration to the ideologies and subject positions that were offered within it, as they may feel that they do not apply to them.

To position the young person as the sole saviour of the world is to revert back to the Romantic notion discussed in the previous section. A contrasting characterisation employed in the "child as saviour" texts is that the young people are constructed as more ecologically-minded and humane than their adult oppressors, who form the dystopian authority in the world of the text.

Even though the protagonists themselves may be represented as having agency and being capable of moral and political judgement, this form of narration has the potential to paint certain ideologies as positive or negative. Representing young people according to Romantic notions runs the risk of depicting protagonists who are staunchly opposed to certain ideologies instead of being open to recognising the multiplicity of ideologies that exist within their world and how these coexist. To simplify perspectives on ecological crisis into positive and negative is to perform the same simplistic grouping of child and Nature that denies readers the option to engage with a variety of ideologies. Furthermore, to simplify solutions to ecological crises might result in readers feeling that solving environmental issues is easily achievable and doesn't require any shift in current human lifestyles. Reducing ecological crises to the results of one key event might imply that real world issues will be solved as simplistically. This damaging logic could also risk readers not engaging with the offered ideologies and subject positions due to the protagonist's ability to save the world so easily. One solution to this issue is to represent protagonists who, instead of solving large-scale problems, are involved with small-scale issues that require practical action.

Localising issues in literature for young adults provides the opportunity for the readership to draw closer parallels between the world of the text and their own reality, including how they might be able to take similar ecologically-based, practical action to that taken by the protagonists of these novels (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 96). Foregrounding these notions in the fiction invites readers to consider their own communities and the day-to-day, practical things that they can take into their own hands. As Stephens (2006) notes, "positive and negative impacts on environment caused by ways of inhabiting it can be very transparent in small-scale ecologies" (p.43), and this transparency can make practical action seem more viable, offering the potential for the

readership to want to make ecologically responsible decisions about their lifestyles and communities. Texts that show the benefits of viable small-scale community activities invite readers to make parallels and to potentially become more involved in clubs and events in their schools and in the broader community. Focus on practical action asks the reader to consider the things in their life that they have influence over, and the ways that they can change these behaviours or patterns to become more ecologically responsible. Representing local and manageable issues in young adult literature avoids the sprawling complications of ecological issues on a global scale, and provides the opportunity for readers of young adult fiction to make informed decisions that will shape their ecological attitudes.

In discussing small-scale local issues in literature for young people, Bradford et al. (2008) use the novel *Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster* (Winton, 1993) as an example of a realist fiction that takes on ecological issues such as pollution and habitat destruction and as such is “grounded in dystopian themes and settings” (p. 90). That story, which tells of a protagonist who finds an example of water pollution in his community that he can tie to a direct source, is more localized than it would be if this pollution were the result of the entire city or country. Giving this polluter a tangible and specific face makes the issue more manageable and easier to comprehend. As a part of this discussion, Bradford et al. note that it is through taking action on situations like this that young adult protagonists develop a moral and political core as they progress towards being independent and informed young people, spurred on by notions of the environment and Earth being fragile, as well as how human interactions with the earth need to be carefully considered (Bradford et al., 2008, 91). When the story concludes and the reader is faced with a real world of large-scale and small-scale situations to comprehend, this example of development through practical action may offer an avenue for the development of ecological subjectivity. However, no

matter what perspective a text offers readers or what ecological issue is represented or solved, the issue of the anthropocentrism remains. Both the medium of the novel and the maturation journey of the protagonist are inherently anthropocentric, even if this maturation does occur through the protagonist becoming more politically minded about the ecosystem.

Anthropocentrism and Multiple Subject Positions

The anthropocentric nature of literature is unavoidable, particularly when discussing literature written for young adults. The first complication is that literature is a cultural production on paper made from trees. The second is that literature nearly always takes human subject positions, and is therefore most often the process of the human author detailing the events and lives of humans or anthropomorphic animals or creatures for a human reader. However, when examining young adult literature, there is the further complication of the close connection between young adult literature, narratives of maturation and *Bildungsroman* (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 91). As a result, when there is any discussion of Nature or environmental issues in young adult literature, this discussion is still anthropocentric as opposed to dealing with notions closer to deep ecology (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 91). Stephens comments that this representation of the environment for young readers requires three things: a landscape with humans or anthropomorphic animals to perceive it, a landscape as the site for the narrative, and the ability for these human or anthropomorphic animals to develop in relation to their contact with nature (Stephens, 2006, p. 41). Therefore, even when characters are represented as having agency, of being capable of moral and political judgement, and as being involved in small-scale and practical actions, the journey is still tied to the development of that protagonist and the development of their ecological subjectivity. Something created by people and for people will never truly be able to

engage with notions outside of the human perspective (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 91). However, it is possible to represent a variety of ecological subject positions within these texts.

Massey (2009) argues that while readers will not be able to achieve a wholly ecocentric subject position or partake in ecocentric actions, including a variety of ecological subject positions within a text gives the reader an opportunity for a more balanced perspective. In presenting ecological subject positions for readers to consider, Massey explores how a sample of picture books and novels for children and young adults can offer a platform for exploring environmental ideologies. Her process is guided through three key positions: unrestrained anthropomorphism, restrained anthropomorphism and ecocentrism, with these positions sitting on a spectrum of human-centred through to environment-centred logic. As a reader will always still be human and never be entirely removed from the connotations of this position, the inclusion of ecocentric perspectives enables readers to challenge and rethink anthropocentric positions. Since the anthropocentrism of the young adult novel cannot be resolved, this representation of a variety of subject positions provides a way to bring more balance to this issue. The position of the reader will stay anthropocentric to some degree, but exposure to ecocentric positions can offer a greater understanding of how the reader connects to the other parts of the world. Massey even suggests that in order to form an ecological subjectivity, engaging with both anthropocentric and ecocentric subject positions is necessary so that the reader can consider multiple subject positions and navigate through these positions to arrive at their own sense of ecological subjectivity (Massey, 2009, p. 217). By providing multiple ecological subject positions for a reader to consider, an author can partially balance the inherently anthropocentric medium of the young adult novel.

Engagement with a variety of perspectives is crucial when performing a postnatural reading. Not understanding or considering the anthropocentric aspects of the ecosystem means that an individual has not attempted to fully comprehend their ecosystem and its interlocking parts. Only aiming to understand the beautiful or natural parts of the environment does not develop a balanced or beneficial ecological subjectivity. Massey does not place an emphasis on young adult dystopian fiction in her thesis, yet her discussion regarding the development of an ecological consciousness or ecological subjectivity is valuable for this study because of what these multiple subject positions can offer towards the development of a postnatural subjectivity.

Regardless of the positions that the reader brings to the text, by offering the reader multiple ecological subject positions, the text provides the opportunity for the reader to enter into a dialogue with the ideas. This dialogue might give the reader a sense of affirmation about their own perspective on certain issues, or cause them to revise their thinking. Even though some or all of these ecological subject positions might be rejected by the reader, giving readers the opportunity to engage with different perspectives will provide a space for these readers to create a more exact ecological subjectivity through the acceptance or rejection of aspects of these subject positions. For example, when Massey discusses Colin Thompson's *The Tower to the Sun*, she notes that the characters in the story were able to adapt to their environment, but that they didn't change their behaviour (Thompson, 1996; Massey, 2009, p. 217). Some readers might find this ending difficult to digest, as their assumptions throughout the text may have revolved around notions of these characters coming to their senses and learning from their mistakes. Being exposed to texts with subject positions that the reader finds difficult to relate to enables the reader to gain a more balanced and carefully considered sense of ecological subjectivity. The development of a postnatural perspective relies on a capacity to understand how various

ideologies interconnect just as the physical aspects of the ecosystem do, and the representation of multiple subject positions assists in this process. A useful strategy is for texts to have multiple narrators or a multi-stranded narrative.

Including multiple narrators in a novel provides an opportunity to present more than one subject position that can be perceived as an ecological subject position when being read from an ecocritical perspective (and similarly from a postnatural perspective). Bakhtin claims that a double-voiced discourse could be considered as a more ethical fiction. When two ideological positions are represented, Bakhtin felt that more freedom is given to the reader to agree or disagree with what they perceive the writer is claiming in the text (Bakhtin, 1984, p.6). Mike Cadden's examination of double-voiced discourse to young adult literature finds that the inclusion of more than one voice in a young adult novel challenges the reader, as it resists them having to "accept a single, unchallenged view of events" (Cadden, 2000, p. 151) and encourages an engagement with the text where the reader is forced to consider their own perspectives on the events. Cadden explores Stephen Chbosky's doubled-voiced novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), and considers the ways that the unreliability of the narrator due to his resistance to providing real names, and potentially even his own identity, offers space for alternative interpretations of the story. Cadden also examines Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) and Ursula Le Guin's *The Beginning Place* (1980) as double-voiced narratives with external narrators, offering a variety of young adult positions through which the reader can piece together the dynamics of the world of the novel. However, the presence of two or more voices in a novel does not guarantee dialogic discourse.

While a novel might offer different speakers, if these characters do not have distinct perspectives and ideologies then there is still the potential for the literature to offer something

akin to a single-voiced narrative. In *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: the Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (1999), Robyn McCallum undertakes an extensive study of how Bakhtin's ideas can be applied to readings of young adult literature. McCallum discusses the formation of subjectivity, which is a core theme of young adult literature, and how the young adult novel portrays a dialogic process whereby the young adult protagonist navigates through a world of language, culture and politics to arrive at a sense of self (McCallum, 1999, p. 3). The various discourses and ideologies to which the protagonist is exposed require them to be taken from the solipsism of their childhood years, to begin to place these aspects of the world in context with each other, locating their own place. Dialogic strategies offer the ability for there to be two stories and characters with differing social and cultural backgrounds and ideologies, allowing a dialogue to form not only between the positions of the protagonist and their society, but between the two narrators (McCallum, 1999, p. 55). In dystopian fiction, this offers the opportunity to explore two different perspectives as they resist the dystopian authority, the protagonist and a faithful member of the dystopian society, the protagonist and someone outside of the dystopian society, or even the ability to examine life before, during and after the dystopian society via a multi-stranded, temporal narrative. Dialogic strategies like double-voiced narratives offer a rich opportunity for a postnatural reading, as different ecological subjectivities can be mapped and related.

In *New World Orders*, the authors note that dialogic strategies are similar for both dystopian and utopian narratives, but the main difference between these narratives is in whether the protagonist is represented as having subjective agency (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 19). In dystopian societies, tension usually arises between the protagonist and the society in which they live due to that society's push for surveillance, conformity and repression. This situation of

competing relations between self and other provides an environment where dialogism can be observed. The young adult protagonist responds to the tension by assessing the social and cultural norms, and where they fit into that context. A common representation of dialogism in these novels is the presence of two cities that have markedly different lifestyles and ideologies (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 24), similar to the corpus of texts examined by Applebaum (2009, p. 38).

A protagonist's awareness of, escape to, or contact with people from this other city implements a dialogic structure into the novel, particularly if there are multiple narrators who live in the different cities, providing the reader with accounts of the diverse cultures and perspectives on the world. These techniques can provide a position for readers to consider multiple meanings of language, as the multiple narrators will have different contexts for words and different cultural and social notions surrounding them. One of the examples discussed by Bradford et al. is Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands* (2002) where the protagonist Louisa keeps two diaries, one for her parents, which conforms to the expectations of her society, and the other for herself. The dialogue between these entries provides a space for readers to compare ideologies and thus be more richly informed about the dynamics of the society. Another example is the *Hungry Cities Chronicles* (2001-2006) by Philip Reeve, which provide multiple perspectives throughout the series from people living within and away from Traction Cities (mobile cities that prey on others), Static Cities (cities that stay grounded and are viewed as more ecologically sound) and a variety of perspectives in between. Texts that provide multiple subject positions (whether through multiple narrators, multi-stranded narration, or other means) provide materials/strategies that are more conducive to a postnatural reading. When a variety of perspectives on the world are represented, there is the opportunity for the reader to consider all

of these ideologies and the ways that they interact within the confines of the world of the novel. For Massey, exposure to a multiplicity of ecological subjectivities assists with a balanced development of one's own ecological subjectivity. However, some representations of multiple subjectivities and ideologies in young adult literature can be read from an ecocritical or postnatural perspective as juxtaposing Nature and technology instead of offering a range of positions to consider.

Nature and Technology

In examining her corpus of texts (published between 1980 and 2002), Applebaum found that the novels often juxtaposed two types of societies that conform to her categories of mechanism, naturalism and equilibrium, with one of the styles of society being depicted as superior. Much in the way that a single-voiced narrative runs the risk of a more didactic perspective that has less of an opportunity to be challenged, the juxtaposition of ecological subject positions in this manner may serve to represent basic subject positions with which readers might find it hard to connect. Texts that set up a binary opposition offer a simplistic position for readers, as there is no real spectrum of ideologies that might enable a productive engagement between the reader's preconceptions about the issues and how they are textually presented. Aside from offering limited subject positions, this juxtaposition risks portraying technology in an overly negative way. Applebaum argues that positioning technology as the enemy of Nature runs the risk of creating a readership that fears technology, which she considers is a reckless standpoint in a time when technology is relied upon in order to have a hope for living sustainably (Applebaum, 2009, p. 19). Applebaum's analysis contributes to the development of a postnatural perspective for this thesis, critically and creatively, as it brings to light not only the issue of the characters'

interactions with Nature but also their interactions with technology. The next section will discuss each of Applebaum's categories of mechanism, naturalism and equilibrium in more detail to further highlight the importance of not representing these views in a juxtaposed manner and the limitations that this would pose for a postnatural reading.

Mechanism

By making a connection with Massey's work, Applebaum's first category of mechanism can be seen as a grouping of ideologies similar to unrestrained anthropocentrism. Applebaum defines mechanism as a society where technology is attributed an extremely high value, and placed over Nature in ways that might serve to dominate or exploit this part of the ecosystem (Applebaum, 2009, p. 25). As with unrestrained anthropocentrism, Applebaum points to the construction of these societies as providing limited options for subjectivities, namely the fear of technology and therefore despair at its prevalence in the reader's own world. The communities that Applebaum defines as adhering to mechanism use technology extensively to the point that Nature is entirely dominated by this society, either being abused for resources, entirely forgotten, artificially created or ceasing to exist (Applebaum, 2009, p. 26-27). Applebaum notes that mechanistic societies are linked with notions of oppression and depersonalisation, and that these are often the societies from which the dystopian protagonist begins their journey. This suggests that the reader is supposed to view these societies in a negative capacity, and that the dependence on technology may be lumped together with this sentiment (Applebaum, 2009, p. 28). With this outlook on the world as their base, the protagonists then expose themselves to different ways of understanding and interacting with Nature and technology, moving towards societies that engage less with technology and have a more balanced acceptance of and interaction with Nature.

One of the texts that Applebaum includes in her study is Jeanne DuPrau's *The City of Ember* (2003), which provides an example of protagonists, Lina and Doon, who flee from a mechanistic society into a world in balance with Nature. Ember is an underground city that was constructed in order to provide a small group of citizens a chance at surviving the harsh conditions above ground. In order to ensure that this group does not rise to the surface too early, the only document that described the existence of another place was put in a timed, locked box. Ember is depicted as having worse conditions than those which many contemporary readers would consider their own reality, as many basic resources are starting to deplete. Worst of all are the blackouts that are occurring more frequently and for longer periods of time. Ember was designed to only last a certain amount of time, but when the protagonists attempt to draw the attention of the authorities to the document that could take the citizens of Ember above ground, they are dismissed. The mechanistic society of Ember, which relies on stocks of food and generated light, is represented as being temporary and controlled by corrupt officials. When Lina and Doon make it above ground, there are no visible cities or structures, only grass, trees and animals. This stark juxtaposing of Nature with the mechanistic society implies that a reliance on technology is close-minded and fleeting, compared with the Natural landscape above, which holds promise for the future.

Naturalism

Under Applebaum's category of Naturalism are those texts that depict societies based on agriculture and where advanced technology is either unknown or viewed as unsafe. Nature is often revered in these societies according to the Romantic notion of it being divine or holding a position of morality (Applebaum, 2009, p. 25). In some of these communities, there are severe punishments for having an effect on Nature, and living in this style of society is paralleled with

what is seen as the superior human values of being ideologically open and caring (Applebaum, 2009, p. 36). These are often the kinds of societies that the protagonists run away to when they escape from the mechanistic societies, which further entrenches the ‘Nature good/ technology bad’ binary opposition. Characters living in these societies are depicted as happier than the citizens of the mechanistic cities, and the protagonists are represented as achieving positive personal growth after their arrival at this new society (Applebaum, 2009, p. 30-31). One of how this contentment is expressed is in the characters’ choice to live in the naturalist society, as opposed to the oppression and depersonalisation that mark belonging to a mechanistic society (Applebaum, 2009, p. 32).

The complete rejection of technology and lack of aspiration towards a balance between technology and Nature offer the troubling position for young adult readers that the technology in their own world is something to be rejected, and that the only way to truly care for the planet is to engage in pre-industrial lifestyles. The near impossibility of this lifestyle for the reader, and the disregard for how technology can encourage a balanced and non-harmful interaction with nature, are reminiscent of the messages provided by the protagonists of young adult dystopian fiction who solve large-scale issues, leaving the reader sceptical about the future and helpless to do anything about it.

Equilibrium

Some of the texts in Applebaum’s corpus, however, depict societies which aim more at a middle ground between these dichotomous perspectives. Applebaum terms these societies of ‘equilibrium.’ Even though Applebaum does document texts that display equilibrium, there are not many examples from her selection of texts that privilege such a balance. Equilibrium, where

the society achieved a balance between their engagement with Nature and technology, has some parallels with naturalism, but with the important distinction of working towards and respecting balance (Applebaum, 2009, p. 25). Applebaum finds that texts which represent societies and plot structures of equilibrium are in line with modern ecological thought in the environmental debate, and that these depict hope for a sustainable future where it is possible to resolve or manage ecological issues (Applebaum, 2009, p. 34). As in naturalist societies, inhabitants of equilibrist cities are represented as being content both in their lifestyles and in their ideologies, and reflecting on their ecological choices and positions (Applebaum, 2009, p. 38). However, instead of representing aversion to technology in a positive light and linking this with ideological openness and care, the novels privilege notions of balance that allow them to live sustainably (Applebaum, 2009, p. 38). Due to this striving for balance, societies of equilibrium have the greatest potential for incorporating multiple subject positions, and therefore provide a wider variety of material for the reader to engage in a dialogue with the positions that they bring to the text.

In her summary of her analysis, Applebaum notes that out of the sixteen sample texts, fourteen conformed to the mechanistic model, with these novels clearly depicting the negative potential of these societies and warning the reader of “a future in which technology if developed at the expense of nature will only bring disaster” (Applebaum, 2009, p. 42). Unfortunately, this also means that these texts “often associate technology, not only with the loss of anything green and living, but also with the loss of individuality and civil, as well as personal, freedom” (Applebaum, 2009, p. 42), and the suggestion that technology will be an oppressor of Nature and even of the people who created it. Even more concerning is that only four of the books balanced out this style of society with the equilibrium approach, with the remaining texts opting for the

naturalism model. This polarising of lifestyles, while offering two rigid subject positions, does not offer a platform where a reader can consider a multitude of perspectives and concepts. Massey provides a solution for this issue in her discussion of the connection between multiple subject positions and the strategies of multi-stranded narration and multiple narrators, highlighting how these writing techniques provide the opportunity for readers to engage with a broader spectrum of perspectives from which to create, justify or modify their own ecological subjectivity (Massey, 2009, p.219). Representing events and concepts from different perspectives will enable a dialogue between the ideas within the text, providing more of an opportunity for readers to think critically about the ways in which all of these positions interlock to form the story world.

Conclusion

This chapter explored some potential issues that may arise during investigation of the representation of Nature in young adult dystopian fiction. Four potential problems in this crossover were identified, along with the techniques that might serve to balance out these issues: the authentic child (the political child), the protagonist as saviour (small-scale communities and practical action), the text as anthropocentric (multiple ecological subject positions), and the juxtaposing of Nature and technology (equal representation of societies and ideologies). These countering techniques provide opportunities for a more open dialogue with the reader and between the characters in the texts, enabling a process that offers broad options for readers to align with the subject positions offered in the text. These techniques also offer the opportunity to see the value and place of perspectives that a reader might not normally connect with. Through

providing this open representation, the texts also offer readers a space to compare these perspectives with the initial understandings of Nature that the reader approached the text with, and how this process can affirm, challenge or cause revisions to a reader's position as an ecological subject. Even if this reader continues not to align with this ideology, their awareness and understanding of this concept could lead to them taking on a more postnatural understanding of the world of the text. These techniques pair well with a postnatural reading as they provide a textual space where boundaries are being challenged and broken. Providing a space where readers can consider notions of the postnatural in young adult dystopian fiction will allow them the opportunity to draw parallels between the world of the text and their own world, as well as how they can accept all parts of the world, even the ones that might seem less desirable, as interconnected and coexisting.

The next chapter examines the focus texts from the perspective of these issues and balancing techniques. The three novels will be read from a dialogic perspective, particularly focussing on the three terms in each novel that were outlined in the Introduction. By examining how the protagonist's understanding and usage of these terms shift as the novel progresses, the discussion draws a connection with this protagonist's development towards a more postnatural perspective. As their usage of these terms shifts, the protagonists come to have more of a context for understanding how their world operates. In doing this, the protagonists gain access to other ways of living in the world outside that of the dystopian society, and begin to construct a more accurate ecology of their world. By moving away from the monologic ideologies of the dystopian society towards a more dialogic and postnatural perspective, these protagonists come to understand how the various parts of their world are interconnected and co-exist, and how the spectrum of ideologies in the world can be connected in the same manner.

Chapter 3: Dialogic Encounters: Reading the Postnatural in the Focus Texts

Writing and reading novels is a highly dialogic process. When a reader approaches a text, they bring a myriad of understandings about language gained through diverse texts and interactions. For Morton, to gain a postnatural perspective it is necessary to factor all parts of the ecosystem that is our world, from novels to depression (Morton, 2010, p. 2), making it crucial to consider all interactions that a person has had with language when engaging with a postnatural reading. If ecological thinking has really been polluted as much as sea, sky, and land, then all of the ways in which a person has perceived ecology and ecological crises will shape their reading of a text. My intention for engaging with the three focus texts was to not only explore how a postnatural reading might operate, but to consider how the focus texts could affect the creation and drafting processes of the creative component for this thesis, *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys*. Specifically, I wanted to highlight the relationship between shifts in key terms in these texts and the development of their protagonists.

This chapter analyses *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, *Days Like This*, and *The Big Dry* according to the four sets of issues and techniques represented in the second chapter of this exegesis. The Romantic affiliation of the child with Nature can be balanced out with the technique of representing a child more balanced in both social and Natural environments. The depiction of the protagonist as saviour can be balanced with a narrative based around small-scale communities and practical action. The anthropocentrism of young adult literature can never be

removed, but it can be addressed through the representation of multiple ecological subject positions. Lastly, the juxtaposing of societies and the ways that these communities interact with Nature and technology can be reconsidered through a more equal representation of these perspectives and lifestyles. These four sets of issues and techniques were identified in the secondary literature that explored young adult literature from an ecocritical perspective. As this thesis argues for the value of a postnatural perspective, my approach was to explore how these issues and techniques could guide a reading of the focus literature with respect to representations of interconnectedness and co-existence. Bakhtin's theories of living discourse and dialogism inform my examination of how key terms in each of the novels shift in their meaning. In *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, the terms Illegals, Balance, and machine will be investigated. For *Days Like This*, the focus will be placed on the terms Wall, harvesting, and Committee. Finally, in *The Big Dry*, the terms of significance are Welfare, wet countries, and food. The ways in which the protagonists of these three focus texts understand and use these terms shift significantly throughout the course of the novels. Through a dialogic enquiry, this chapter performs a postnatural reading that connects the shifts in meaning of these terms with the protagonist's development of a more postnatural understanding of their world.

Throughout this chapter I demonstrate how the shifts in language coincide with the periods of resistance in the counternarrative when the protagonist gains access to more information about the dystopian society. Baccolini and Moylan discuss the role of language in the counternarrative, as the dystopian society controls the use of this language and the protagonist often uses this language in an anti-social manner when they rebel against the dystopian authorities (Baccolini & Moylan, 2013, pp. 5-6). Using language in an anti-social context can allow the protagonist access to old or other ways of living in the world that are

outside of the control of the dystopian authorities, which can lead them to uncover sinister aspects of their society (Baccolini & Moylan, 2013, pp. 5-6). The revelations that can occur through the anti-social use of language might come from independent investigation or through the thoughts and ideologies of those who live outside of the reach of the dystopian society. As the counternarrative progresses and the protagonist resists the hegemonic order (Baccolini and Moylan, 2013, p. 5), the ways in which the protagonist understands the use of some of the language in their world begins to change. The more that the protagonist resists, the more new meaning they gain.

As this chapter will read the protagonist's shifting understanding of language from a postnatural perspective, I will not be analysing the ecological subject positions that the protagonists can be seen as assuming at the end of the novel; rather I will be assessing how the protagonists demonstrate an understanding of how the spectrum of ideologies and systems in their world are interconnected and co-exist. The novels will be examined for how these texts can be read according to the techniques of the postnatural child, small-scale communities/practical action, the representation of multiple subject positions, and the equal representation of societies and ideologies and how these techniques can guide a discussion on interconnectedness and co-existence in the novels of both the physical and ideological realms of the protagonist's world.

The work in this chapter was crucial to the development of the counternarrative and terms with shifting meaning in the creative component *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys*. Therefore, the focus texts and the theoretical insights from postnaturalism shaped the way in which the creative component was written and drafted. After investigating the focus literature for the remainder of this chapter, this exegesis in Chapter 4 will apply this same process to the novel *When the Cloud*

Hit the Kellys while making connections to the underpinning theory and how the development of these two components affected each other.

Introduction to the Protagonist and the Dystopian World

This first section will provide an introduction to the protagonists of the focus novels, as well as the key terms that shift throughout the duration of the counternarratives. When engaging with a postnatural reading and the ways in which a protagonist develops to understand more about interconnectedness and co-existence, it is necessary to examine how this protagonist is represented at the start of the novel. Baccolini and Moylan find that a core convention of dystopia is the initial representation of the protagonist as being content with their society (Baccolini & Moylan, 2013, pp. 5-6), as this represents the way in which most citizens of the dystopian society understand their world. In the context of young adult dystopian fiction, the protagonists are not only growing out of their childhood years and starting to take on more responsibility, but they are also coming to understand what it is to be a part of their society. As this society is dystopian, there might be little room for the protagonists to make decisions about the direction that they want to take with their lives, causing them to feel resentful about the place that they are expected to take within this society. In *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, Ashala has escaped to avoid permanent detention in a centre for young adults with powers (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 14). In *Days Like This*, Lily must escape in order to save herself from the harvesting process that will drain her of life (Stewart, 2011, p. 47), and George of *The Big Dry* has limited options for his future due to severe dust storms (Davis, 2013, p. 6). Ashala and George are not able to attend school, and Lily only has access to educational materials that are heavily censored by the dystopian society. The futures of all three characters are dark not only because they have such limited options, but also because they are not likely to grow to adulthood.

Typically, at the beginning of a dystopian narrative, the protagonist may not have had to deal with many of the day-to-day aspects of life, as these responsibilities are often handled by their parents. It is only after an event or situation requiring the young adult protagonist to take on more responsibility that their understanding of their world broadens, and hence the event or situation can be read as the start of their development towards a more postnatural perspective. Even though this development might not include an understanding of non-human animals or aspects of the ecosystem at this stage, an awareness of the processes of the world and the ways in which humans with different perspectives on life affect each other are the first steps towards applying this logic to other parts of the world.

In *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, Ashala assumes leadership of a Tribe of young Illegals who have fled the city, and is made aware of the dynamics of the dystopian world due to her duty of care for these children and teenagers (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 12). When Ashala is detained by Neville Rose, the dystopian authority in the novel, he makes a comment on how crucial Ashala's role of responsibility is for the continuation of the Tribe. Rose suggests to Ashala before her interrogation begins: "you were the leader, the glue that held them together. Now you're gone, it won't be long before they start squabbling with each other, and leave the safety of the Firstwood. We think it shouldn't be more than six months until they're detained" (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 12). The weight of having responsibility for the whole Tribe makes it necessary for Ashala to become more informed about her world in order to protect her group, which would not have been the case if she had chosen to run away into the wilderness alone.

In *Days Like This*, Lily is pushed out of a state of contentment due to the severe headaches that her older brother Daniel is experiencing and the emotional ambiguity that their parents have towards this situation (Stewart, 2011, p. 7). Lily discusses her contempt towards her

parents and their emotional distance from her and her brother Daniel early in the novel, where the narrator provides an account of her reaction to their mother's aloofness towards Daniel's pain: "it was like someone had taken a giant sponge and soaked up all her joy and love and fury, her father's too" (Stewart, 2011, p. 14). Daniel's headaches require Lily to care for her brother, but they also are the impetus for her to begin questioning their world and the explanations fed to them by their parents and the Committee.

In the first chapter of *The Big Dry*, George waits for his father to return home before an enormous sandblaster hits. When their father does not return, George must assume responsibility for his six-year-old brother Beeper (Davis, 2013, p. 7). George consoles Beeper by assuring him that their father will return, but acknowledges that "people going missing was nothing unusual. Not with the heat, or the lack of food, water and fuel. Not with the snakes and wanderers, not with the sandblasters that hurled across the city every few days" (Davis, 2013, p. 12). George understands this situation as his mother had disappeared several years before. Each of these situations removes the young adult protagonist from whatever early stage of contentment they were still experiencing, and begins the process of resistance against the dystopian society as they meet challenges and new information due to their responsibilities.

One of the biggest challenges in young adult dystopian fiction from a postnatural perspective revolves around scant resources and how food, water, and other necessities are controlled by the dystopian society. In each of the focus novels, there are references to the only available resources in the world being controlled by the dystopian authorities. If the protagonist has access to these resources, then this becomes one of the ways in which this protagonist is controlled by the dystopian authorities. If the protagonist does not have access to resources, they

are or become aware of being locked out of an elite group of people whose lives are considered to be more important than theirs.

Ashala initially rejects access to resources by fleeing from her city, but is able to cater for her basic needs in the forest where she sets up her Tribe. Before the Tribe acquires Menders for their medical needs and Leafers to make the crops grow faster, they make use of Ember's vast knowledge, Ashala commenting that "she'd been the one who showed us what plants could be eaten and how to prepare them, taught us to grind seeds to make flour for our bread, and found herbs to use for medicine" (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 100). The young adults and children of the Tribe take on these tasks as a point of pride as this lifestyle represents freedom from the oppression of the dystopian society through dependence on resources. However, Ashala's world has recovered from the Reckoning (a time when the planet saw environmental chaos due to human abuse of the world and its resources), and the world outside of the cities is not a hostile landscape.

When Lily was a child she realised that her family received resources that other people did not, which sparked an early awareness of her world and the separation between those inside and outside the dystopian society. Lily remembers when the Wall was constructed, "cording off the privileged areas around Sydney Harbour, keeping out people considered less worthy, people who could not afford water or food from the food-production facilities, people the newly formed Central Governing Committee has deemed expendable" (Stewart, 2011, p. 15). She and Daniel eventually realised that "the Wall kept them in just as much as it kept other people out" (Stewart, 2011, p. 15). However, even before this drastic measure of separation was taken, "before the Wall went up and blocked everything out, it was obvious that the water moon didn't fall on the less fortunate suburb across the wide road outside their house" (Stewart, 2011, p. 45),

the water moon being a mechanical sprinkling system that delivers fresh water like rain. Even as a child, Lily had a keen sense of how unfair it was that some people received the necessities and others did not, but it wasn't until she was a teenager that she comprehended how much being tied to these resources led to a control over every other aspect of their lives.

Where Ashala is able to make a simple life in an unaffected wilderness and Lily grew up with privileged resources, George (*The Big Dry*) neither has access to enough food and water nor has the ability to live in a landscape that would provide for him and his brother. George lives in a world where food is difficult to obtain as an adult, let alone as a child who is not able to trade manual labour for goods (Davis, 2013, p. 10). Due to the sandblasters, there is no place to which George and Beeper would be capable of escaping that would provide an opportunity for fresh water or growing crops. Instead, both of the children are entirely dependent on their father, who in turn is dependent on shipments of food sent from the wet countries where it is still possible to farm and produce goods. On the outside of the wet countries, there is not a huge amount of dystopian control, but, as stated by Emily, there is a feeling amongst those locked out of these countries that the food which is deemed "Foreign Aid" (Davis, 2013, p. 10) is intended "to stop too many of us going there" (Davis, 2013, p. 10). Growing up in this world means that the boys feel that their lives are not valued, and they are faced with a bleak future that will entail a life-long struggle for basic survival.

Understanding the dystopian society's control over resources is often the beginning of a protagonist's wider understanding of their society, gained either from a situation of privilege or of lack. Awareness of the ways that other people live is the start of the protagonist being able to comprehend the other aspects of their ecosystem. As the counternarrative progresses in all three texts, the protagonists' realisations of these dynamics of power in relation to other groups of

people expands to an understanding of the affect on plant life, animals, weather and other non-human parts of the world. In order to analyse how the counternarratives of each of the novels can be read as progressing alongside the development of the protagonist towards a more postnatural perspective, I will now provide a perspective on the initial ways that the protagonists of each of the focus novels can be perceived and the significance of the key terms that have been selected for examining in relation to each protagonist's journey. After representing how the terms of significance can be read from a postnatural perspective, I will demonstrate how the use of these terms shifts throughout the novels, and consider the connections that can be made between the counternarratives and the development of the protagonists towards a more postnatural awareness.

The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf: Machine, Balance, and Illegals

The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf is set in a world recovering from the Reckoning: a time when the remaining population was forced into cities to escape harsh environmental conditions. The seven cities, including Cambergull, where Ashala grew up, must adhere to a variety of Accords that were implemented due to the destruction that led up to and was experienced during the Reckoning. One of these Accords is the Benign Technology Accords that put laws in place restricting the development of complex technology. A small percentage of the population began to be born with abilities that develop in childhood, and the citizens of the cities feared that the abilities of these individuals might have an effect on the Balance, being a stable ecosystem, and cause another Reckoning. Many of the abilities were control over Natural occurrences, such as Rumlbers, who can create earthquakes, and Skychangers, who can bring rain. The protagonist Ashala has the ability of sleepwalking through spiritual planes, and escapes the city for fear of being contained and controlled in a detention centre. In doing so, Ashala becomes an Illegal, an enemy of the dystopian cities, and establishes a life for herself and other young runaways in the

Firstwood. The novel opens at a time when Ashala is imprisoned by the dystopian society, and about to be subjected to the machine that will mine her memories and compromise the stability of the Tribe in the Firstwood.

At the beginning of the text, the term ‘machine’ symbolises the corruption of a faction of the dystopian authority who have secretly broken the Benign Technology Accords and created a machine. This machine is capable of interrogation through the exposure and manipulation of memories, and its creators Neville Rose and Miriam Grey intend to use it to capture Illegals. The term machine is originally juxtaposed with the Natural life that Ashala and her Tribe live, as well as represented as being an entirely destructive force due to how humans used technology to abuse their ecosystem in the lead up to the Reckoning. The fear and disgust surrounding this machine resonate with the concern that Applebaum discusses in her analysis of the representation of technology in young adult science fiction (Applebaum, 2009, p. 19), as Ashala’s immediate response is to connect the development of technology with ecological destruction. During Ashala’s first experience with the machine, she is overwhelmed by its various parts and functions. She notices that Neville Rose does not enter the room with her, commenting that “he would want to be able to pretend to me, and maybe even to himself, that he wasn’t a part of what happened in the room” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 24). This observation indicates that Ashala is aware that the machine was created in order to cause harm. From Ashala’s first interaction with the machine, the box is represented as something that is speechless but acts with intention. This attribution of agency and life to the machine can be seen from the way in which others interact with the box, as well as the feelings that Ashala experiences as the interrogation begins. Before the first interrogation, the creator of the machine, Miriam Grey, gives the machine an “approving pat” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 42). As the machine begins to

interrogate, Ashala describes the way that it attempts to search for answers in her mind as “tendrils of energy burrowing into my skull. They seemed to poke at me, digging around as if they were searching for something” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 47). Through the references to these surges of energy as “they” and “them,” the text offers the position for the reader to accept the machine as a conscious mind that acts intentionally, a loyal subject to the dystopian authorities. This sentiment is developed as Ashala begins to experience the dreamscape that the machine projects into her mind, as it takes the form of an enormous hound that hunts her across her home landscape of the Firstwood (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 29). It is through the combination of the Accords against the creation of technology, the representation of the machine as a conscious servant of the dystopian society, and Ashala’s perception of the machine as unnatural, that the term machine is initially delivered in a monologic fashion with negative connotations.

Concerns about the machine and technology in *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* relate to upsetting the Balance, the second term in this novel that will be investigated. The Balance represents a world that has a functioning ecosystem where human behaviour does not cause natural disasters. Initially, the Balance is introduced in an almost religious context concerning “the natural order” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 11) that is handed down through a text by Alexander Hoffman entitled *Letter to Those who Survive* which details the mistakes of the humans in the past, and the Reckoning that came as a result. Similar to the disconnect between the usage of Nature and the notion of its independence in *The End of Nature*, which were discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the implication that Illegals are outside of the Natural order is a concept that can be read from a postnatural perspective as jarring. The Balance is something that both Illegals and Citizens believe in, but Hoffman’s text is referred to in a narrow and ambiguous way by the dystopian authorities. This is highlighted in the initial interaction between Ashala and

the key dystopian authority Neville Rose when discussing Hoffman's text and the flood 230 years before, when the eighth city was lost due to a Skychanger's attempt to bring rain (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 19). Due to the concerns of the Citizens regarding the potential for Illegals to unsettle the Balance, the term Balance is initially a charged term that causes political uproar in conversation and wider social interactions. The most recent conversation about the dynamic between the Illegals and the Balance is between Citizens and a group who call themselves Friends of Detainees, who ask the Question: "Does a person with an ability belong to the Balance?" (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 11). This question was first asked by Ember and her father, and prompted a change in the ways that Citizens thought about Illegals. However, as this is still an early concept in the cities and the fear of another Reckoning is so high, Balance represents a social and ecological harmony that Illegals have no place in.

Just as with the terms machine and Balance, the term Illegals is represented as having a largely monologic meaning within the confines of the dystopian cities. Ashala and other Illegals do not perceive this term as Citizens do, but aside from the Friends of Detainees, most Citizens consider Illegals a threat to their way of life. The treatment of Illegals in the world of the text can be read as alluding to the current refugee situation in Australia. In the same way the media hype focuses on this relatively small number of people "taking jobs" or being a threat to "Australian lifestyles," Illegals too are used as scapegoats. With Citizens focusing on their hatred of Illegals, they are less available to critique the dystopian society itself. Those Illegals who are determined as being dangerous or fail to report themselves for Citizen Assessment are incarcerated in the multiple detention centres surrounding the cities (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 26). If the ability of the individual is weak or beneficial, then they may be put to work, as in the case of Menders, who are employed as nurses (Kwaymullina, 2012, 5). These Citizens are termed Exempts, meaning

that they are not Citizens, but paradoxically not “technically an Illegal any more either” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 8). In the face of being placed in detention, Ashala and others like her have chosen to become Illegals and run into the wilderness in an attempt to survive outside of the dystopian society. The use of the term Illegals and the treatment of this group of people sees significant revision for the reader throughout the counternarrative, but within the context of the dystopian society, Illegals are represented in a negative capacity, as these people are perceived to pose a threat towards the Balance and hold the potential for causing another Reckoning.

Days Like This: Wall, Harvesting, and the Committee

Days like This opens with an introduction to the protagonist Lily, her house, and her family life, which comprises most of what Lily understands about the world. Lily and her siblings have not been allowed to leave their house for several years, and school has been replaced by heavily filtered learning programs which the third-person omniscient narrator comments on when they state that “any idiot could see that the Central Governing Committee heavily censored” (Stewart, 2011, p. 13). Lily’s world has been ravaged by the effects of “the warming,” which has made agriculture difficult due to unpredictable rainfall and exceedingly hot and dry conditions as it “ate away all the living things in their shrivelled-up world” (Stewart, 2011, p. 15). As a result, the dystopian authority of the Committee placed a Wall around the city, which serves to keep out the people who are not capable of paying for resource allocation as well as those who “defied the Committee” (Stewart, 2011, p. 15) and keep in the citizens needed to keep running Committee programs. The three main programs in the city are the harvesting program, where fluid is extracted from teenagers to make a serum that reverses ageing, the military program, which trains children to be Blacktroopers, and the breeding program, which provides more resources for the former two.

As Lily can remember times before the Wall went up and there was a need to stay inside, she and her older sibling Daniel are depicted as rebellious teenagers from the beginning of the novel. Lily and Daniel's younger sister Alice, who has less context for the way the world used to be, is more accepting of the dystopian society and desperate to remain naïve to any misgivings of her parents or the Committee. Alice's complacency is also due to the unequal treatment from their parents, Megan and Pym, who have been emotionally distanced from Daniel and Lily by the effects of compulsory medication but are still motherly and fatherly towards Alice, who is scheduled for the breeding program. Lily and Daniel also have medication forced upon them, as do many young people in the world of the text. Black pills result in a sense of distance from offspring, white pills are a placebo until children are older, yellow pills prepare the pituitary glands of young people for harvesting, and pink pills prepare young women for the breeding program (Stewart, 2011, p. 12). The novel opens when Daniel is experiencing extreme headaches due to his medication, and Lily's remaining contentment with her situation is eliminated when Daniel is removed from the house without explanation (Stewart, 2011, p. 27): an event which motivates Lily to rescue her brother and save herself from a similar fate. Before Lily escapes her house and society, Wall, Committee, and harvesting are represented with specific contexts that shift as Lily grows to understand more about her world.

From a postnatural analysis, the Wall represents a physical manifestation of the barrier between parts of the ecosystem that Morton's "polluted thinking" demonstrates. The introduction of this term is from the perspectives of Daniel and Lily, who can remember a time before the Wall was put up between their city and the houses that were visible close by. When the novel begins, the siblings have been under house curfew for several years, but have memories of when the Wall was built. Both Lily and her brother were initially excited about the Wall, but soon

began asking their father questions. When Lily questions her father about why the watermoon, a mechanical device that delivers “rain” due to unreliable weather patterns, does not fall on the houses across the road, he dismissively responds that “we can afford it and they can’t” (Stewart, 2011, p. 33). He then tells his children to stop asking questions, not only about the watermoon, but in general. This line of questioning represents the early stages of developing a postnatural perspective as Lily was attempting to put the parts of her world into a context, seeking a connection with each other, even when a physical structure had been built as a divide. In the introductory chapter of the novel, Lily reminisces about times before the Wall and the warming, when she and her brother would be allowed outside and climb trees, remembering that “Daniel used to tell her they could overcome the Wall; that it didn’t have to define them. But the fact was, the Wall kept them in just as much as it kept other people out” (Stewart, 2011, p. 15). This reminiscence illustrates how Lily’s access to other ways of understanding and living in the world has been shut out by the Wall and the Committee. At this early stage of the counternarrative, the Wall symbolises Lily’s resentment for being housebound and not being able to engage with the world in the ways that she did as a child. However, there are other aspects of Lily’s society that were not presently so open and required direct rebellion against the dystopian society.

In the beginning of the novel, neither Lily nor her brother is aware of the concept of harvesting. In *Days Like This*, harvesting is the process whereby fluids are drained from the overstimulated pituitary glands of young people in order to produce a serum that slows the aging process for the adult population. The process of harvesting is done over a period of months, leaving the young people weak and progressively shrivelled. After a period of incapacitation, the subjects die. While the Wall is a physical structure that cannot be hidden from the population, harvesting is a process that is done behind closed doors. Parents are aware of the process, and

agree to sacrifice one or two of their children to this program in exchange for regular doses of the serum.

Lily comes to understand more about this process when she is fleeing the Blacktroopers and takes refuge in what she thinks is an abandoned house. Inside, Lily finds Meredith, a woman who is experiencing rapid ageing because she rejected Blacktrooper drugs and serum. Meredith explains how the drugs distanced her from her two children and made her willing to send them off for harvesting in exchange for the serum that would keep her young. Despite her knowledge of the effect of the drugs, Meredith blames herself, commenting several times that her children were not taken, as she gave them away freely. When trying to get them back, she informs Lily: “they said I’d donated my children of my own free will. They said my children were the price I had to pay” (Stewart, 2011, p. 90). The situation gave citizens a cruel choice to either hand over their children or be left outside of the wall to die of rapid ageing.

The first time that harvesting is mentioned in the novel is when a high ranking member of the Committee, who regularly visits the household, responds to Daniel’s disgust for him, commenting that it is “almost harvest time,” (Stewart, 2011, p. 24). From this point, harvesting becomes a term of great interest for Daniel, who works on hacking his education device so that he can learn more about the term. Daniel succeeds in hacking into a government system, and alludes to this achievement in a conversation with Lily. After Daniel is taken away, Lily takes it upon herself to continue Daniel’s research and take risks to inform herself about the world. Lily begins to form more of an idea about this process through eavesdropping on a conversation between her parents, but it is not until her escape attempt that she begins to have a more concrete understanding of her world. Even after her experience with Meredith, Lily struggles to fully comprehend harvesting until she is taken to the facility for draining.

The Central Governing Committee that controls the population inside the Wall is represented as sinister from the early pages of the novel, but it is not until Lily comes to comprehend harvesting that she truly understands the motivations of the Committee. Early references to the Committee are offered from the rebellious perspective of Lily, but the context of this word changes as Lily discovers more about her society and the intended places for her, her siblings, and all other young people inside the Wall. The first mention of the Committee is in reference to how heavily it censors the educational materials for young people (Stewart, 2011, p. 14). Before Lily makes her escape attempt, the term is also used to discuss the treatment of those outside the Wall who are not deemed of importance to the Committee, the medication that is forced on all of the citizens within the Wall, and the menacing Committee member Max. The hatred that the older two siblings have for the Committee is represented through their relationship with Max (Stewart, 2011, p. 26). After a visit at the start of the novel, Max becomes angry with Daniel and reminds Pym, the children's father, that "lucky for you the money runs in your family, otherwise you'd be out there, too" (Stewart, 2011, p. 29). After leaving the dinner table, Daniel and Lily reflect on how "like a lot of things in their world, the composition and real purpose of the Committee and the Blacktroopers remained unexplained" (Stewart, 2011, p. 30). This comment demonstrates the limited understanding that the young people have of many concepts in their world. In these early stages of the novel, the negative feelings towards the Committee are based on frustration at the rigid control over the lives of young people. It is not until Lily meets people from outside the Wall that she begins to fully comprehend how various groups and power structures within the world interact.

The Big Dry: Welfare, Wet Countries, and Food

George from *The Big Dry* is introduced to the reader on the eve of his thirteenth birthday in a world that is ravaged by drought and enormous sandstorms called blasters. George and his family live off canned goods produced in richer regions called the wet countries. After George's father does not return before the effects of a particularly large blaster, George and his brother Beeper must begin to look after themselves. The processes that the brothers go through are initially those of domestic upkeep, such as fixing the roof and straining the silty tap water, but these tasks gradually become necessary for their survival. The boys particularly begin to fear for their safety when a fourteen-year-old girl, Emily, begins trespassing on their property, and takes some of their food and water. On top of their issues with Emily, the brothers must also prevent any neighbours or passersby from knowing that their father is missing, otherwise Beeper will be taken away by Welfare as he is under seven years of age. In the initial chapters of the novel, Welfare and the need to acquire food present immediate challenges for George, and rumours of the wet countries begin to shape his world.

Even when food is a scarce resource and blasters are beginning to cause significant damage to the house, George's primary concern is Welfare. As with the other terms that are examined in this chapter, the meaning of Welfare shifts with the more knowledge that George gains about his society and his world because he gains more perspective on what happens to children once they are taken away. The initial understanding that George has of Welfare is from a first-hand experience at school, before the school had been destroyed by harsh environmental conditions. When the parents of one of George's classmates die, the boy's younger twin sisters are taken away by Children's Welfare (Davis, 2013, p. 19). Even with this limited knowledge, George's primary concern is to convince his neighbour and others that their father is still present.

An example of this behaviour is when George needs to fix a roof tile that has come loose during the blaster. After his attempt at repairing the roof, George yells down “it’s alright Dad, we’re coming down now” (Davis, 2013, p. 30) after he notices their neighbour Mr. Carey in his backyard. However, hiding their father’s absence becomes increasingly complicated as George and Beeper begin to run out of food. Food is grown and produced in the wet countries, which have not been affected by climate change as harshly as the area in which George lives, and is sold or traded for high prices.

The wet countries are not mentioned very often in *The Big Dry*, but the moments where they are discussed build the social and political scope of the world where some people exist in barren lands while others have access to wealth and more liveable conditions. George’s scant knowledge of the wet countries is clearly symptomatic of their father’s attempts to protect them from the less pleasant aspects of their world. In their father’s absence, George actively begins protecting Beeper from the harsh realities that George begins to piece together. As it becomes less and less likely that their father is going to return, George begins to create stories about their father being an international spy due to their father’s expertise in engineering. George creates the concept of the Drought Barons who live in the wet countries and want the crippling drought in many parts of the world to continue forever. George claims that the Drought Barons “don’t want people to grow their own food. That way they can control it all and charge lots of money” (Davis, 2013, p.107), inventing more details as Beeper becomes attached to the ideas. When Beeper considers whether Drought Barons might be their usual vendors, George comments: “The Drought Barons don’t sit in the dust selling tins. They live in the wet countries, in big clean houses with swimming pools filled with water that sparkles like diamonds. And they have grass. Green, soft grass” (Davis, 2013, p. 108). This statement demonstrates both the limited

knowledge that the boys have of the wet countries, as well as the way that George perceives himself as being locked away from the beautiful and luxurious parts of the world. Similarly, George does not yet understand his own part of the world and the reason why they experience severe drought, telling Beeper that it is “something to do with high pressure system, and low pressure system, and pollution and, I don’t know...hotter weather” (Davis, 2013, p. 30). In response to this information, Beeper asks why they had never moved to another place without these issues, to which George says: “I’m not sure there is such a place. People still come here from other cities, and from the country. So it must be worse there” (Davis, 2013, p. 30). As the reasons behind the sandblasters and the politics of the wet countries are not only shielded from them, but difficult to understand at his age, George focuses instead on the tangible tasks that can be done around the house. The most essential of these tasks is providing food for himself and his brother, which requires him to leave the house.

The final point for discussion is a collection of terms that revolves around food and water and how the discussion of these concepts intensify as the boys’ personal stocks begin to deplete. In the early sections of the text, the boys understand the importance of cans of food, empty jars, and saucepans due to their upbringing, and are careful with the way they ration out their food. At this point, George and Beeper are not aware of how much food costs and what price they can get for trading their kitchen goods. When George begins to suspect that their father will be gone for more than a day, he does an inventory of the things that they have in the cupboard. He counts each of the tins, boxes of crackers, and packets of dry noodles. This inventory introduces the notion that the boys don’t have access to fresh food, particularly their reverence for the ‘special tin’ of red salmon which they only ever eat on important occasions (Davis, 2013, p. 26). At this time, the reader is introduced to the knowledge that the boys usually only have access to

processed and packaged foods. Similarly, jars take on importance as they are needed for filtering the silty water that comes out of the tap, and saucepans and other kitchen items become significant as items that can be traded for food or ration coupons. This context for food and household items sets up the ways in which Emily is presented to the reader when she arrives, as she begins to consume the boys' resources, including the tin of red salmon.

In each of the three texts, the initial chapters of the novels establish the protagonist as dissatisfied with their current living conditions, and give a context for the three terms that begin to take on greater significance as the counternarrative progresses. The ways in which Ashala, Lily, and George understand these terms in these early chapters are represented as vague and tenuous, although they may feel that their understanding of this concept is solid. The discussion will now examine how the four issues and corresponding balancing techniques can be examined in the texts from a postnatural perspective as the protagonists' understanding and use of the significant terms begin to change.

Towards a Postnatural Perspective

Considering representations of authentic and political children in young adult dystopian fiction is crucial to a postnatural analysis of these texts, as protagonists and supporting characters must be able to break out of the mould of the authentic/political child to begin their development towards a postnatural perspective. Limiting focus to a character's connection to Natural/biological or social/historical aspects of their world means that this character is less likely to understand how the parts of their world interconnect and co-exist. While it is possible to engage in a postnatural analysis of a text where the protagonist can be read as a representation of an authentic child or political child, such a reading does not allow for how terms shift during the course of a counternarrative to follow the development of a postnatural awareness. As this project is founded

in a dialogic approach and is centred on an examination of how language shifts through living discourse, it is essential to examine texts which could be read from a postnatural perspective as offering a protagonist who begins as uninformed about interconnectedness in his/her world and grows to comprehend co-existence in the ecosystem.

In order to develop towards a more postnatural perspective, a protagonist must become more informed about their world, regardless of whether they live in a built or Natural environment. Ashala grew up in the context of a city, and escaped when she was twelve years old to live in the wilderness to be away from dystopian rule and mandatory detention in the centres for Illegals (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 15). In this wilderness, Ashala begins to develop a strong sense of self and identity. Part of this identity is a rejection of cities and built landscapes, which in this novel become synonymous with oppression and ignorance. However, by only connecting with the Firstwood and her Tribe, Ashala becomes ignorant about parts of her world that are crucial to understand in order to work towards a harmonious ecosystem. Ashala's aversion to built landscapes is apparent in a discussion that she has with Ember where her approach to interactions with Citizens and detention centres is one of violence. Ember counters with: "What do you think would happen to the Tribe if we attacked a detention centre? The government would throw every enforcer it had at us. When will you understand? We can't change the world with violence. Only with ideas" (Kwaymullina, 2012, p.38). Ember attempts to open Ashala's mind to understanding how she can accept other perspectives without having to agree with them. By encouraging Ashala to make her contribution to society through a shift in ideas instead of violent action, Ember demonstrates attributes of a postnatural child who influences Ashala and brings her closer to sharing this perspective.

In *Days Like This*, Lily also has exposure to other young people who could be read as having a postnatural sensitivity, and through her interactions with these young adults Lily comes closer to having a similar awareness herself. Lily is confined to her society, locked off from the rest of the world by the Wall as well as by a curfew that prevents her and her siblings from leaving their house. Lily remembers when she could interact with the outside world, as well as with students and teachers at school (Stewart, 2011, p.22). Lily even expresses jealousy about the flying foxes that she can see from their bathroom window, but the text then notes that “even the flying foxes came in much smaller numbers now. Would those little creatures eventually slip away altogether, to where all the other good things had gone?” (Stewart, 2011, p.22). Including this question shows her awareness that she is not the only one who is being affected by the impacts of climate change. A warmer climate has led to dependency on the dystopian system, which has resulted in a life of increasing restriction. Even away from the dystopian society, the effects of human-induced climate change are global, so there is no escaping the oppressive, life-changing conditions. When Lily finally comes to meet young people from outside the Wall, they broaden her perspective on how the parts of the world interconnect, even when some of those parts cause restrictions for others.

In *The Big Dry*, George only has access to his immediate family and neighbours due to the harsh conditions of the blasters. The boys’ neighbour, Mr. Carey, became a recluse after his wife died from ‘dust pneumonia’ (Davis, 2013, p.84), and the boys’ mother committed suicide by walking out into a sandblaster because she was severely depressed (Davis, 2013, p.84). As a result, George is left with only his father and brother as other influences. When George is confronted with Emily, she brings a whole set of experiences and opinions that he finds difficult to connect with. Due to the sandblasters, George has no context for communicating with

somebody who is extremely different from himself, and his immediate reaction is to be defensive and shut himself off from bonding with Emily. Emily, who lost her sister and was abandoned by her parents, encourages the boys to let go of family values as their parents probably ran off as well, commenting that “parents are a thing of the past, boys. Like rain. It’s everyone for themselves” (Davis, 2013, p. 77). Climate change is only implicitly addressed in *Days Like This* with discussion of “the warming” (Stewart, 2011, p. 15), but there is a heavy implication in all three of the novels that the compromised state of the world in the present or the past that affects the ability of people to connect was a result of human-induced climate change. The shifts in weather patterns have made some areas nearly impossible to live in, allowing dystopian authorities to establish a monopoly over resources. These same shifts in weather patterns have created huge divides, so that it is impossible for some groups to communicate. As the protagonists seek information about their world, they move towards a more postnatural awareness of both space and time, by having to accept the perspectives of those people that are still living in the world as well as understanding how the world came to be in its present state.

Ashala begins to move towards a more postnatural position early in the novel, but this is masked due to her intentional memory loss through a ritual-based form of hypnosis. Before allowing herself to be captured in an attempt to liberate the children being detained by the dystopian authorities, Ashala goes through a ceremony with Ember that temporarily suppresses her core memories (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 85). While Ashala’s postnatural perspective is informed by her interactions with many people, her understanding is fundamentally shaped by her interactions with Ember. For example, Ember has read Alex Hoffman’s text in detail, which is why Ashala understands that this original document is not scathing of people with abilities despite the use of it as evidence against integration with Illegals (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 16). Ember’s ability

revolves around memories. On her first meeting with Ashala, Ember reveals, “I can take memories from people. And I can share them, change them, and even invent ones that never happened” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 205). This disclosure ties in with the representation of Ember as being able to empathise with others who have wildly different perspectives to her own. However, Ember also struggles with this ability, and confides in Ashala that: “I can’t forget. Not anyone I meet, not anything I see or read or hear. I remember everything in perfect detail” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 205). Thus, Ember’s ability leaves her overwhelmed with information and the connections that she makes between these people, conversations, events, and ideas. Aside from being influenced by Ember, Ashala’s perspective is also influenced by a spiritual event which helps her to understand more about the Balance and the ways that parts of her world are interconnected.

When Ashala and another core member of the Tribe, Georgie, are initially running away from the dystopian society and seek refuge in the Firstwood, they are confronted by saurs who claim that the human race has no place outside of the cities. One saur, whose name is Wanders-too-Far, informs the young girls that the traditional saur songs “say humans fear difference, and when they are afraid, they will find a way to destroy what they fear. Unless they do not know it is there” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 189). This comment associates Ashala and Georgie with the humans of the past: ones who caused the Reckoning. Wanders-too-Far decides that the trees of the Firstwood should have the ultimate decision, explaining that “these trees grew from seeds that survived the great chaos. They carry within them the memories of their ancestors, the lost forests of the old world. They do not forget what humans have done” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 189). The trees therefore are left to judge if Ashala and Georgie will be capable of co-existing with the forest and its inhabitants harmoniously. When Ashala places her

hand on one of the trees, she is filled with vivid emotions and images that show her the interactions between humans and Nature in the past, and the ways in which human actions led to the Reckoning (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 100). From this experience, Ashala vows to become a protector of the wood and plays a key role in acclimatising new recruits of the Tribe to the ways and expectations of the Firstwood. This initial representation of Ashala can be read as her being represented as the sole saviour, and her development towards a more postnatural perspective is through her growth from this position as she accepts not only the contributions that can be made by others in her world but the strength of approaching issues as a community. Through influence and guidance from both human and non-human perspectives, Ashala begins to understand different ways of understanding ecology and ecological crises, as well as the need to accept that others hold vastly different opinions to her own. These positions and others assist Ashala along a journey that can be read as shifting towards a more postnatural position, where she becomes comfortable with the ways in which the world is interconnected. However, the fragile ecosystem in Ashala's world was a thing of the past, with the world having largely renewed itself. However, for Lily (*Days Like This*) and George (*The Big Dry*), their world is irrevocably altered by climate change.

In contrast to *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, *Days Like This* does not offer the opportunity for young people to be represented as running away from a dystopian society into the wilderness as the effects of climate change have eliminated the vast majority of plant and animal life on the planet. In the beginning of the text, Lily has a monologic understanding of her world, with regard to both language and the ideologies connected with these words, as she has been raised under the control of a dystopian society. Not only is the educational material that is offered to young people by the Committee heavily censored (Stewart, 2011, p. 13), but Lily's

parents are also very unwilling to answer any questions that she has about inequality or the workings of her society. For example, when Daniel asks why he and his sisters cannot leave the house, their mother responds with: “Why are you questioning this now? It hasn’t changed in three years and it’s time you accepted it” (Stewart, 2011, p. 14). This conversation between Lily, Daniel and their parents, as well as many other similar ones, demonstrates the level to which the parents have been distanced from caring about their children due to the medication that is enforced on citizens by Blacktroopers, the army that implements the ruling of the dystopian authorities. Furthermore, the complete unwillingness to allow their children to understand their world represents how tied Pym and Megan are to the oppressive dystopian regime.

After an escape attempt, Lily is forced to wear a bracelet that can tighten and cause immense pain, providing yet another barrier to her using her ability to explore and understand the world. Once Lily finds a way to escape her house, she encounters a group of young people who are from beyond the Wall and she attempts to escape with them. Lily’s initial attempt fails, but she is rescued from a draining facility used for harvesting and reconnects with the same group of young people. It is with this group that Lily begins to access different ways of understanding and living in the world, giving her more of a context for the Wall, harvesting, the Committee, and many other terms that she had a frustratingly narrow perspective on. As many of the people in the community have run away from the city, some have a stump where the bracelet from the city has been activated and severed their hand (Stewart, 2011, p. 132), but Lily’s bracelet was removed before there was this threat. Even though there are many young people who offer Lily new perspectives on things about the world that she felt certain of, as well as things that she admitted to knowing nothing about, the character of Rosemary has a particular influence on her. Rosemary, an older lady in the community who has aged “naturally,” is even truthful about the

feelings of the community that Lily may find difficult to adjust to. When Lily asks whether some of the community did not want her there, Rosemary responds with: “some people just don’t like newcomers. There’s some debate about bringing strangers here. It’s understandable, if the Blacktroopers track you here it puts everyone in danger” (Stewart, 2011, p. 147). In being honest about this situation, Rosemary immediately offers a transparency that Lily has never had access to while growing up in the dystopian society. Through the perspectives of a variety of people in the community and the guidance of Rosemary, Lily moves towards a more postnatural understanding of her world.

The Big Dry represents George as closer to the position of the political child than the authentic child. One reason for this is that there are no places in the world that have not been affected by human-induced climate change. With there being little Nature to engage with, George can be read from a postnatural perspective as being close to the political child who is aware of society and history. George may not understand intricate details about social and historical development, but his context for the world is founded more concretely in these concepts than in a connection with Nature. The absence of forests and much plant life in *The Big Dry* and *Days Like This* speaks to Morton’s notion of a lack of a representation of Nature having as much to offer a postnatural analysis as the representation of plant and animal life (Morton, 2007, p. 5). In *Days Like This*, there are some conscious comments about “the warming” and its role in how the world has changed over the years, but in *The Big Dry*, this information is restricted to a few comments from George about the world that their parents knew, including one time when the drought broke and there was a downpour for several days (Davis, 2013, p. 102). However, after the rain, the weather patterns returned: “the heat raged again. Puddles evaporated. Leaves wilted. Grass sprouts burnt and turned the colour of straw” (Davis, 2013, p. 6). Like Lily

in *Days Like This*, George has been sheltered from the way that his world operates, but is exposed to these ideas through contact with Emily, who has a political sensibility. Even though Emily does not have a well-founded knowledge of the workings of their world, she has more of an idea than the boys and relays these fragments through a series of bitter discussions and arguments.

Emily particularly broadens the boys' understanding of the wet countries and Welfare, as well as the connection between these, which shapes how these terms can be perceived by the reader. While the wet countries began almost like a dream, they transformed into a sinister region of the world that provides the dry areas with food in the hope that they won't be inundated with refugees (Davis, 2013, p. 91). Similarly, George's fear of Welfare is increased as Emily tells the boys what she knows or at least suspects about Welfare, that they "make their money selling kids to the wet countries...to couples who don't have them, or...to people who need children to work" (Davis, 2013, p. 182). This latter option is left ambiguous, with a tone that hints towards sweatshop labour, child trafficking, or other grim futures. This shift in the terms of Welfare and wet countries begins to flesh out the social and political dynamics of the world of the text, and how different countries and groups of people are interconnected.

As I argued in the previous chapter, notions of the authentic and political child are not compatible with fiction that explores the development of a postnatural perspective from a dialogic approach. The idea that children are somehow more closely linked to Nature than adults is contrary to postnatural ideas, as postnatural theory is founded on perceiving the ways in which all things are interconnected. Of the three focus novels, only *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* represents this idea that children are closer to Nature, through the focus on Ashala's Tribe of young people living in the Firstwood, even though there is one mention of there being adults

who have fled the cities to lead a similar life (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 16). For a dialogic approach, especially in the case of young adult dystopian fiction, it is necessary to examine a postnatural child whose understanding of terms shift and evolves away from monologic ideas and discourse. As the protagonists encounter characters more aligned with the perspective of the political child in their world, they begin to have more of a context for understanding how their world is interconnected instead of being perceived as separate spheres – the parts of the world under dystopian control and the parts that are not. The periods of resistance and oppression in the counternarrative coincide with this trickle of knowledge for the young adult protagonist, and give this character access to ways in which the world has been lived previously, or is experienced in different areas. The terms of significance discussed in this section demonstrate how the protagonists' understanding of these notions shift as characters move from an initial period of ignorance to a more encompassing postnatural perspective. As these terms develop to take on richer meanings in the mind of the protagonist who begins to use this language in new contexts, the protagonist moves towards a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the world is an ecosystem of interconnected parts, rather than a system comprising separate parts.

Working as a Community

Just as the notion of the authentic/political child is not compatible with a postnatural analysis due to the new boundaries that these concepts construct, the idea of the protagonist as saviour presents similar complications. A postnatural reading focuses on an acknowledgement of the place of all things in the ecosystem. If a protagonist somehow saves the world, the position of the protagonist would be represented as desirable to the reader. This would offer the protagonist as having a superior or more ecologically friendly outlook on the world, and therefore move away from a postnatural understanding of how ideologies can overlap and co-exist. Instead of offering

a position that a reader cannot assume, a protagonist who develops towards a postnatural perspective offers a position that a reader is able to take up, examining their own world and putting the segmented physical and ideological aspects of this ecosystem into a whole. This position might not result in readers taking direct action as a result of reading the text, but instead offers an opportunity for readers to put the vast array of ecological subjectivities into a more connected context. Environmental issues cannot be simplified as either favouring humans or favouring Nature. Consequently, ecological crises and the situations that lead to them should not be represented in this either-or manner in literature. Postnatural readings of young adult dystopian fiction point to spaces where complications and conflicts across numerous parts of the ecosystem, that is, Earth, are contributing factors to ecological crises.

Of three novels, *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* comes closest to representing a protagonist as the primary saviour of the world. Ashala intentionally forgets her memories so that she can infiltrate Detention Centre 3 and propagate ideas about the false rebellion of an imaginary figure called the Serpent. Ashala takes this action in order to draw the troops from the Detention Centre out and expose the advanced technology, the machine that is being used within its walls. However, the focus on Ashala's role in this plan is balanced by the involvement of a variety of Illegals and the saurs, as well as the mystical aspects of the Balance itself. Ashala undergoes a spiritual experience in the Balance where she is in conversation with a giant serpent that represents an early creator of parts of the Earth (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 64), closely aligning with the dreamtime tradition of the Rainbow Serpent in Aboriginal cultures. The Rainbow Serpent, although not mentioned in the focus text, represents fertility and togetherness of community. Similarly, the serpent in the text is a creator and a spirit of the Balance, being harmony between all things. The serpent refers to Ashala as his granddaughter, and claims he is

an old spirit and creator that reformed that part of the earth after the Reckoning, saying, “this one place is mine. The trees were the first to return. Then I sang the lizards into being, to guard what I had created. And everything else followed” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 124). In this experience, Ashala is both informed about the processes of her Earth and humbled by the discovery that she is only a small part of it. Through this scene, the text offers the position of understanding how all life is attempting to come back to the Balance after the Reckoning. Ashala’s experience with the serpent not only makes her experience of the Balance more tangible, but introduces the notion that the restoration of the Firstwood and the species that live near it was a conscious act.

Lily in *Days Like This* is represented as having a much smaller part in the revolt against the dystopian authorities than the part that Ashala plays in *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*. One of the ways in which Lily can be read as being a small part of the destruction of the dystopian society is that she becomes part of a community that defies this society. Lily’s development in this community is largely centred around a shift from independence to being able to trust and rely on others, including when she must have faith in other members of the community to rescue her siblings. The community is small in scale, and takes practical action against the dystopian government to steal resources, interrupt their power sources, and kidnap young people who are undergoing the harvesting process (Stewart, 2011, p. 84). However, these small attacks against the dystopian society were never designed to take the city down, as the small community would not be capable of such a feat, or of dealing with any retaliation. The demise of the city in the text is brought about by affects from climate change, with progressively strong earthquakes eventuating in a tsunami that floods the city and brings down the Wall. When the Wall falls, it is described as breaking “as if it were made of sand” (Stewart, 2011, p. 173), indicating that the boundary that the dystopian society put up between their control and the rest of the world is

insignificant next to the ways in which aspects of the world interconnect and affect each other. The tsunami kills many of the city's citizens, but the tearing down of the Wall results in the tearing down of the ideologies that it represented. Citizens do not last long without the serum from harvesting, and as they wither and die over the following weeks, they come to understand more about how their world operates than they have learned in years under oppression behind the Wall. Lily plays a role in the counselling of and care for these citizens as they die, which can be read as further developing Lily's postnatural perspective as she gains personal and specific insights into perspectives on the world and how these were dominated and shaped by the dystopian society. This helps Lily come to terms with her own upbringing, including the fractured relationship that she had with her parents, and makes her more emotionally prepared to begin healthy relationships with people in the community.

In *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* and *Days Like This*, there is significant social restructuring as the dystopian society is interrogated or defeated. In the case of *The Big Dry*, there is no such social restructuring at the conclusion of the novel and George is not represented as causing significant change in the world. The lack of significant social change grounds the novel, as George is a thirteen-year-old protagonist who had been represented as extremely vulnerable throughout the story. If George had risen to defeat the Welfare system or find a way to get himself and his brother into the wet countries, this would have represented the dystopian authorities in this world as much less threatening than they had been in the first two thirds of the novel. This progression would have made the world-building within the novel lack authenticity, as it would raise the question of why no other citizens within this world had made such an attempt before. Instead, the novel is centred on George dealing with the loss of his father and his impending responsibilities as the guardian of Beeper. These responsibilities require him to have

more of a context for his world, as he must now find ways to source food and other basic necessities. Even when Emily makes George aware of the deeper issues in the wet countries, he does not voice a desire to fight this system (Davis, 2013, p. 182). George is very aware of his capabilities, and is not represented as being someone who can do anything on a heroic scale. George's entire motivation in the novel is to keep Beeper safe from Welfare, even when he has to begin forging bonds with other people and revealing that their father is missing. This forging of tenuous bonds is part of the expansion into postnatural thinking for George, as he must come to understand that many people have been emotionally and psychologically affected by the harsh conditions in which they live.

George also plays a role in affecting the outlook of others, particularly the boys' neighbour Mr. Carey. When George finds the courage to ask Mr. Carey for help with getting Emily out of their house, reminding him of the street parties they used to have when his wife was still alive, Mr. Carey simply responds with: "sorry, lad, one person can't make a difference these days" (Davis, 2013, p. 182) before shutting the latch on his door. At the end of the novel, Mr. Carey leaves his property to search for the boys, and shows signs towards being able to accept human relationships again. By focussing on the progression of George to what can be seen as a more postnatural perspective through his understanding and acceptance of other ways of viewing the world, the novel offers a position that readers are capable of adopting and engaging with in their own lives.

A postnatural reading examines ecologies and ecological issues as complex systems of many overlapping parts affecting each other. Each of the focus novels can be read as representing a protagonist who works towards understanding the validity and necessity of a variety of perspectives on ecology and ecological crises, as opposed to protagonists who fix the

broad and complicated effects of human lifestyles with a single event. Sweeping solutions to ecological crises suggest that there is no sense of urgency to deal with ecological issues. Oversimplifying the solutions to these crises puts forward the position that anybody, even a single young adult, would be capable of dealing with these crises if/when the time comes. Instead of this representation, the protagonists grow to understand more about their world and how the social, political, environmental, and cultural aspects of the Earth all intertwine. By representing the desirable position of the protagonist who has context for more of their world and the spectrum of ideologies that are present within it, the texts can be understood as offering a perspective for readers to consider regarding similar processes and for making their own behaviour to be from a position of knowledge and tolerance.

The Challenges of Anthropocentrism

In her investigation of young adult dystopia, Carrie Hintz (2013) notes that “uncovering the failures of the dystopia often means leaving aside childhood and confronting the harsh truths of the adult world” (p. 7), and the young protagonists of these novels are not satisfied with becoming part of and perpetuating the system that their parents accept. As young adult dystopian novels focus heavily on notions of family, friends, and self, they are less compatible with the positions of biocentrism and ecocentrism, as these positions privilege the importance of the non-human aspects of the ecosphere. It might be possible to focus on how human relationships develop in a way that is not destructive to the ecosystem; however, the focus on the human element in these stories still provides complications when reading from biocentric or ecocentric positions. Nevertheless, the conventions of young adult literature are well suited to offering a postnatural position, which examines the ways in which the young protagonist gains more of a context for their world and their place within it. Understanding the world inside and

outside of the dystopian society involves the protagonist understanding not only how parts of the ecosystem are interconnected, but also the human perspectives on this relationship. As postnaturalism leaves room for a focus on an anthropocentric perspective, this position enables a reading of texts that can examine notions of interconnectedness and co-existence without coming into conflict with the anthropocentric underpinnings of young adult dystopian fiction. Therefore, even though young adult dystopian fiction might centre around an anthropocentric plot, reading these primary texts from a postnatural perspective reveals how their young adult protagonists develop towards an understanding of how their dystopian society affects other parts of the world, and the place that the protagonist might have in the wider ecosphere when the boundaries of the dystopian society are dissolved.

In *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, Ashala develops a more postnatural perspective as she grows to care for both the built and Natural aspects of her world. Ashala comes to understand the value of not only accepting that other people and technology exist in the world, but that these aspects of the ecosystem can be a part of an integrated and harmonious future. Furthermore, despite the Benign Technology Accords and Ashala's understanding of the destructive potential of technology which results in the Reckoning, she begins to forge a relationship with the machine. "Machine" originally connotes corruption and selfishness, features that are heavily associated with Neville Rose and Miriam Grey. However, because of her developing experiences with the machine, Ashala begins to realise that this piece of technology is similarly enslaved. In her machine-enforced mental state during the interrogations, the machine takes the form of an enormous dog that is hunting her in the surrounds of the Firstwood. This depiction can be read as the machine being a faithful servant of the oppressive dystopian authorities, lacking autonomy in a similar way to the population of a dystopian society (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 27). In one of

Ashala's interactions with the machine, she removes a collar that is restricting the large dog. Upon removing this collar, the dog becomes docile and playful, exhibiting no ill will towards Ashala (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 78). This change in the intent of the machine can be viewed as it regaining a sense of agency. At this point in Ashala's development, the word machine and her understanding of the small metal box can be read as an acceptance of technology not only as a part of her world, but as a part that does not have ill will towards humanity and the ecosystem. Whereas Ashala begins her journey believing that an investment in the interests of humans or technology can only be a negative approach, she grows to broaden her perspective and understand more about how the parts of her world interact and have the potential to peacefully co-exist.

While Ashala moves from a biocentric or ecocentric position towards an acceptance of built landscapes, humanity and technology, Lily is driven by anthropocentric concerns for the majority of the text. All of the significant terms within the novel – the Wall, harvesting, and the Committee – are terms that Lily investigates as she strives to rescue her brother Daniel from the draining facility where he is being harvested and get her sister Alice away from the breeding program, which forces non-consensual sex on girls in their early teens. Lily disregards her own health and safety, as well as that of her newfound community, in the attempt to fulfil her desire to have her siblings safely around her (Stewart, 2011, p. 127). For the majority of the text, Lily remains focussed on these anthropocentric concerns, but as the story moves toward closure, she also begins to move closer to a postnatural position when the dystopian society is destroyed by a series of tidal waves sparked by earthquakes. Even though Lily is exposed to a variety of subject positions before the Wall comes down, she is flooded with different perspectives on the world as the refugees from this Natural disaster seek assistance from her newfound community. The

community leader Peter addresses both the group who originated in the dystopian society and those who did not. His confirmation that there is no more serum brings a mixed reaction from the crowd, and confirms, to the satisfaction of some and to the detriment of others, that those who have been attached to the dystopian system and offered their children to harvesting programs will quickly age and die (Stewart, 2011, p. 182). During this event, Lily assists the dying members of the old city, taking on the role of counsellor, which exposes her to multiple perspectives. In helping the aged and dying deal with the decisions that they had made in their lives, Lily comes to more of an understanding of the way in which her relationship with her own parents had transformed. Even though Lily does not agree with the behaviour or perspectives of the adults from the now-dismantled dystopian society, and is particularly averse to the justifications given for these, her understanding of these harsh parts of the world can be read as bringing her closer to a more postnatural position. While this change could be viewed from a different perspective as Nature taking its revenge on the human society that has pushed it to its limits, a postnatural reading might understand the tidal wave as a symptom of an unbalanced ecosystem. The tidal wave cannot be seen as acting for itself, and is an effect of the interactions that humans have had with their world from the beginning of industry. With the building of the sea wall and a history of other environmental abuses, the government's reluctance to understand the ecosystem and the ways in which all parts of it are interconnected resulted in the naivety that a structure could prevent the effects of human-induced climate change. Through the dystopian society's unwillingness to understand interconnectedness in the ecosystem, they were the makers of their own demise. Instead of personifying Nature and having it make a claim of morality or righteousness in flushing away the society that continued to cripple the world, a postnatural reading understands this event as an opportunity to examine co-existence.

In *The Big Dry*, the plot remains firmly anthropocentric as the protagonist George focuses his efforts on keeping the family unit going in the absence of both of his parents. George's motivation throughout the novel is not only in trying to provide for Beeper, but in ensuring that his younger brother doesn't get taken away by Welfare. However, as George begins to accept others into his enclosed life with his brother he comes to understand the role that each of these people plays in the world and the ideologies that they hold. Inviting these other perspectives into his life means that George is exposed to multiple positions in the world, and this forces him to consider how other people have been affected by the harsh environmental conditions that the world is plagued by. While this is still an anthropocentric position, George comes to understand more about how different members of the community exist and how they view the world. In their excursions outside of the house to search for their father and food, the boys encounter the rabbitoh man who catches scrawny rabbits and trades them for water or money (Davis, 2013, p. 37). While the boys are initially frightened of this man, they begin to develop a relationship with him when Beeper finds himself blurting out that they are looking for their father. As the rabbitoh man does not alert Welfare, he becomes the first adult that the boys are able to trust. Later, when the boys find the rabbitoh man has been beaten and robbed, they leave him with some of their water. This event demonstrates the ways in which the boys are starting to understand positions in the world and how their lives will change if their father doesn't return.

The second position that the boys come to accept is an understanding of the background and motives of the intruder Emily. The relationship between the boys and Emily gradually shifts from being based on transactions and threats to one of dependency. The final scene in the novel represents George's acceptance of Emily and the knowledge about the world that she has to offer them (Davis, 2013, p. 127). In the same way that Emily has an effect on the boys, they begin to

soften Emily's sense of abandonment. George's perspective towards Emily begins to shift when Beeper repeats a conversation that he had with Emily where she told him he was lucky because he "belongs somewhere. Most people don't" (Davis, 2013, p. 164), which opens George up to the need for everyone in their world to be connected. The third perspective that the boys welcome is that of their neighbour, Mr. Carey, who has become emotionally distant and hardened by the sandstorms, particularly since the death of his wife. The blend of their acceptance that they need Mr. Carey's adult supervision with their need to convince him to come out of his hermit lifestyle causes the boys to understand how the environment has changed lives and affected adults' perspectives on the world. With each of these acceptances, Beeper being reported to Welfare becomes less and less of a likelihood. As the boys come to understand the perspectives of others, George begins to develop what can be perceived as a more postnatural view as he gains insight not only into the value of community, but also into the ways in which other individuals have been affected by the harsh environmental conditions in which they live. While this sentiment remains anthropocentric, George becomes more open to accepting other people into his life, even when these people have very different ideologies to his own.

The three protagonists – Ashala, Lily and George – demonstrate how an anthropocentric plot and character behaviours can still drive the development of a postnatural perspective in a character. In each of the three cases, the protagonist conforms to conventions of young adult literature through their focus on the development of self and discovery of their individual role in life. In each of these stories, it is through an engagement with other people that the protagonists begin to have an understanding of multiple perspectives on their ecology and ecological crises. While there is minimal interaction with non-human animals and other parts of the ecosystem, accepting the ways that other people view the world and putting this perspective into context

with the ideologies of others that they have interacted with is a step towards a more postnatural position. Through caring for those close to them, protagonists can be motivated towards becoming more informed about their world so that they are able to be protectors and providers for those that they love or care about, which can develop towards an ethic of care for the rest of the ecosystem, as is the case with Ashala.

For anthropocentrism to contribute to, instead of working against, a postnatural perspective, periods of resistance in the counternarrative provide a way for the protagonists to discover information that enlightens them about different ways of living in, and understanding, the world. To deny the role of anthropocentrism in literature entirely is to forget about a very large part of the ecosystem, the tendencies of the human species, and the medium through which so many of these concepts are discussed. As noted by the work of Massey in Chapter 2 of this thesis, it is by providing multiple perspectives for the protagonist and reader to interact with, that this technique can support a postnatural perspective by showing how ecologies and ecological crises can be understood from different standpoints, which affect the ways in which these characters interact with the dystopian society.

Nature and Technology

The final area for consideration is the juxtaposing of Nature and technology, and the ways that this affects the development of the protagonist gaining a postnatural perspective. The most important consideration in this interaction aligns with the concerns of Applebaum that were discussed in the previous chapter, and how the representation of these concepts as binary opposites could offer a potentially damaging position to the readership that will have to rely on technology in order to live sustainable lives (Applebaum, 2009, p.19). Fear of technology is also

an important factor to analyse from a postnatural perspective, even when the threat of ecological collapse is removed.

Postnaturalism requires reading a text to examine the ways in which built and Natural environments are represented as clearly defined and separate, or as interconnected and co-existing. To separate the notions of Nature and technology, or to indicate that it is more responsible to live surrounded by one or the other, is to break the fundamental underpinning of postnatural thought. The representation of Nature and technology as binary opposites becomes complicated when reading from a postnatural position as this requires an acceptance of Nature as a social construction and to look past this idea for how the text represents how all parts of the world are interconnected. A postnatural reading requires not only examining how the representation of Nature and technology can be seen as affecting the setting, plot, and world-building of a novel, but equally how the absence of Nature can make a silent comment (Morton, 2010, p. 11). Read in this way, Morton's notion of dealing with "intensity, shame, abjection, and loss" (Morton, 2010, p. 11) is particularly pertinent as these novels represent dystopias, places that Lyman Tower Sargent defines as societies that a contemporary reader would "view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader live[s]" (Sargent, 1994, p.9). Many authors writing in the 21st century, including authors of the primary literature for this thesis, engage with this idea of a world made considerably worse through the effects of climate change. In some instances, Nature is still flourishing, and in others, the rising global temperature has made it difficult for the Natural world to survive. Humans require technology that can provide stable access to resources and shelter, and the owners of this technology therefore control the population. Enter dystopia.

In *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, Ashala's development towards understanding interconnectedness can be read from a postnatural viewpoint as flourishing most clearly through her relationship with the machine. As was discussed in the previous section on anthropocentrism and the representation of multiple subject positions, Ashala's attitude towards the machine changes throughout the novel, from a fear of the machine at first, to a later comprehension of how the machine is oppressed. This progression leads to an acceptance of technology as simply a part of the world, and not as something that is necessarily good or evil. When the technology is in the hands of the dystopian authorities there is the potential for it to be misused, as with the machine being used as an interrogation device. The machine by itself, however, has no negative intention. Ashala even goes so far as to feel that the small box has the "soul" of the dog that is represented during interrogations, and she removes the machine from its room when Detention Centre 3 is burning down (Kwaymullina, 2012, p.169). Ashala's intention is to give the box to Ember, who had previously made a mechanical spider for one of the other members. Through the intention of giving the soul in the machine a body, Ashala shows her full acceptance of the machine as a part of the world that deserves its own sense of autonomy. She also intends for this machine to stay with the Tribe, working against the fear of technology that had been instilled in her since she was a child (Kwaymullina, 2012, p.169). This development connects with the conversation that Ashala has with Neville Rose at the beginning of the novel about whether there is a place for Illegals in the Balance, as Ashala and her kind have been shut out of the dystopian perception of this ecosystem (Kwaymullina, 2012, p.9). In accepting the presence and place of technology in her world, Ashala has achieved the same evolution of thought that she was attempting to push on Neville Rose, Citizens and Exempts – that all things within the world have a place in the Balance.

In Lily's world (*Days Like This*), technology is represented as a privilege that comes with living inside the Wall. The dystopian society controls the means to produce and disperse food and water, but this service is only provided to families who have agreed to give up their children to the harvesting and breeding programs. In order to make families more compliant, Blacktroopers make weekly visits and force medication upon citizens. The medication is given to them under the guise of preventing disease, but in reality prepares young people for harvesting or breeding, and makes parents emotionally indifferent to their children (Stewart, 2011, p. 107). When the Wall is brought down by earthquakes and the sea, all of the technology is swept away with it. This destruction serves as a metaphor for Nature "taking revenge" on the dystopian city and how it too has been oppressed by these hegemonic powers. From a postnatural perspective, the Wall being torn down by a tsunami comments on the interconnection between all things and the price of suppressing a Natural force by building in Sydney Bay (Stewart, 2011, p. 163). The fall of the dystopian society is celebrated by those who lived outside of it, but a postnatural reading also considers the ways in which this event affects communities. Those outside of the dystopian society previously raided the city, ransacking the food production factories and stealing other resources. With these food production facilities and other infrastructure destroyed, life will be even more difficult outside of the Wall than when the dystopian society still existed. The facilities were not just damaged by the waves, but sit underwater as it has "returned to its natural, post-warming shoreline" (Stewart, 2011, p. 282). The dystopian city is gone, but there is still the issue of a significantly altered climate that will affect the ability to grow crops. In a postnatural reading, the decline of a dystopian society represents more than freedom. It introduces new potential challenges.

In *The Big Dry*, most of the technology is destroyed as the dust storms become more frequent as the dirt and grit in the computers and other devices render them useless. Throughout the novel, there is a mention of several vans and cars, but many of these belong to Welfare and the government. As the dust begins to take its toll on George and Beeper's house, collapsing the roof due to a loose roof tile, dust, sand, and grit become even more significant to the driving events in the text. The dust storms have claimed cars, houses, computers, and most other forms of technology in George's world. The pervasive presence of dust and sand forces George to develop a postnatural view as human-induced climate change has made the world warmer and altered every part of the planet. In the world of the text, the wet countries – the few places that have not seen such severe effects – lock out the majority of the world's population, leaving no option for adults in dry countries to change their living situation, let alone two young boys. The text does not provide a miraculous situation where George and Beeper are accepted into the wet countries, but instead they demonstrate an acceptance of their place in the world. While these two societies are juxtaposed, the wet countries are not represented as a better place to live from Emily's perspective, and George loses his fascination with the wet countries, focussing more on what he has around him. In accepting the ways in which he and many other people in the world live, his perspective on these roles matures and he comprehends the functioning of various political bodies and systems in his world. In the same way that George accepts Emily as needing a place to belong, he accepts his own sense of belonging with those structures and people that are left around him.

To conclude the discussion on the juxtaposing of Nature and technology, even when these parts of the ecosystem are represented as binary opposites at the beginning of a novel, this can aid the protagonist's growth to a more postnatural perspective. As the protagonists become

aware of the interconnectedness between the other aspects of their society, it is crucial that they also see the value of both Nature and technology as well as the potential effects that each of these have. Nature is not always a peaceful force, and as the effects of climate change become more severe there will need to be a greater reliance on technology. This reliance will not necessarily only be with regard to assisting human lifestyles, and even when this is the goal there will be a further ripple effect of other positive and negative factors. Furthermore, as science continues to advance, the lines between Nature and technology become increasingly blurred. By bringing a postnatural reading to these texts, we can see how societies, people, and concepts such as Nature and technology need not be considered in binary terms (desirable or undesirable; good or bad), but as parts of one ecosystem that co-exists.

Conclusion

In analysing the focus texts through a postnatural lens, I have shown how this lens has offered me ways of engaging with several of the issues and techniques identified by the secondary literature with respect to the crossroads between young adult literature and an ecocritical perspective. The ways in which the protagonists gain access to new meanings of specific words in their world throughout the text can be read as mapping this protagonist's journey towards a more postnatural perspective. I have discussed how some of these words – harvesting and Welfare – change context as the protagonists discover more about their society and as they resist the hegemonic forces of the dystopian authorities. Other terms – Illegals and Wall – begin to take on different meanings due to events in the counternarrative of resistance. Each of the protagonists begins to understand how their ecosystem is interconnected in different ways. These young adult protagonists are not represented as the sole saviours of the world, and are taught the importance of community and understanding the perspectives of others. All three of these texts

offer a variety of characters, both inside and outside the dystopian societies, who have differing outlooks on the world. Finally, the protagonists come to understand that technology holds a place in the ecosystem, just like any tree or animal. These issues and techniques shaped the postnatural reading of the focus texts, and contributed to the creative component. The following chapter reflects on how I incorporated these ideas in *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys*.

Chapter 4: Venturing Outside: Creative Processes and Strategies in *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys*

I have been writing *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys* since I was nineteen years old. The novel was under a different title in its first few years, *The Life and Times of Peace Kelly*, a story about the frustrations of a young girl with conservative attitudes raised in a house with her left-wing parents and brother. When I made the decision to withdraw from my doctoral studies and move away from Australia to work in China in 2013, this novel started to flourish. I began working in a library for children and young adults where English was taught through an engagement with literature and creative writing. I still work in this school, and have had the satisfaction of seeing it grow from one location to over fifteen throughout China during my time there. The engaging atmosphere of studying literature with children and the questions that they asked about these materials motivated me to come back to my studies and finish what I had started. However, there was also another factor that brought me back to my studies and spurred me to change the creative piece for the thesis. Outside of our cheery classrooms where we share picture books and novels, air pollution sits in a band across the sky. The smog is more visible at some times of the year than at others, but it is a constant background for our discussions and creative work. I soon found the idea of the Cloud infiltrating my novel, and changing its course.

In this chapter I compare two drafts of *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys*, one from June 2014, and the other which leads this thesis in 2016. I examine the creative decisions that I made over this year-and-a-half time span as I refined my ideas, and incorporate my understanding of

the underpinning theory and the focus texts for the thesis. In reflecting on the key differences between these documents, I examine the processes and strategies that I experimented with during the drafting process. This explanation is intended to highlight how these processes and strategies influenced both the critical and creative components of this thesis.

Several key changes occurred between the two drafts of my novels. The first was a shift in point of view, from first-person in the 2014 document to third person in the 2016 document. The second was the use of multiple narrators. The third was the decision to make the Clouds an explicit product of Flagship industry. The fourth was recognising the value of having multiple antagonists. The fifth concerned a major shift in ideologies for Star. The sixth was the decision to have a spatial shift from the city of the Flagship to the Surrounds, which includes both built and Natural environments outside of the dystopian society. Lastly, the final change was to specifically locate the novel in South-East Queensland (SEQ), specifically between Brisbane and the border of New South Wales. Before moving on to these seven areas of change, I will provide some background for the 2014 draft of the novel in order to give a context for the changes that are discussed in the remainder of the chapter.

The 2014 Draft

The earlier draft of *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys* incorporated dystopian elements around the event of the Cloud, which was a one-off occurrence that was a result of fires in southern states. Aside from the individual points which will be addressed in this chapter, there were many other key differences between the initial and final drafts, including the structure of the novel. The plot of the 2014 draft began similarly to the current version, with Peace and her parents having a disagreement the morning of the Cloud which leads to her running away from home. In this early

version, Peace was attempting to make the trek through the Cloud from her own house to Mr. Jenkins' house, intending to take the Jenkins family up on their offer of adoption. Peace still made the first stop at Mr. Fredricks' store to buy supplies, but beyond this point this draft had an entirely different structure.

Each chapter in the story involved a conversation between Peace and a different member of society as she was on her way to Mr. Jenkins' house. These conversations included a mentally ill man in her local park, an elderly couple who tried to take her in from of the Cloud, a foster mother, homeless teenagers, someone looting a local store, a man on a bridge contemplating suicide, and the policeman who found her and took her to the Jenkins' house. Each of these conversations offered Peace different perspectives on the way that her society was being managed. As Peace did not align with the values of her parents, she was increasingly influenced by Jenkins' perspectives on the world. As Jenkins is the mayor in this version of the novel, he is directly responsible for shaping the policies that govern the cities. At the beginning of her journey, Peace follows Jenkins' opinions with blind faith. Through the conversations that Peace has with various members of her society, she begins to be exposed to a spectrum of thoughts about Jenkins' leadership and the future of their city. As many of the people who Peace engages with are in minority groups, these people do not hold a role in Jenkins' idea of a bright future. The citizens express their concerns about the direction that Jenkins is taking, and by the time Peace arrives at his home she has a lot of conflicting information in her mind. Peace discusses the concerns of the city with Jenkins, and finds that she does not agree entirely with his stance on some aspects of governing. She is also uncomfortable with his willingness to hide his intentions and plans from the public. Against the backdrop of her parents' protest in the morning, Peace relays her new information to the crowd.

A Different Point of View

The 2014 draft was written solely from Peace's perspective, and from a first-person point of view (POV). I have often found in other novels and creative work that I have written that I go through a POV change after the completion of a full draft, completely rewriting the novel from a different POV. This is not always a transition from a first- to a third-person perspective. After completing a full draft of the piece, I often get the sense that the story has developed into something very different, and that these changes require a shift in the POV to do the characters justice. These changes in POV are never an easy decision, as both the existing POV and the potential new POV will have benefits and downfalls. My process for this decision is to have fellow authors with whom I studied my initial Creative Writing degree to read the draft and provide specific feedback for this aspect as well as their usual observations. As with several projects in the past, *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys* went through a complete change in POV between the 2014 and 2016 drafts.

One of the biggest decisions I had to make regarding the shift in POV was the voice of Peace Kelly. The issue that was driving the change was that Peace is a fourteen-year-old. Her age then presented two problems. The first of these was that her voice didn't sound authentic at times, as she seemed to have a wisdom well beyond her years, sounding more like she had the insight of a character in her twenties. Readers found this to be disengaging, as it was not a realistic representation. The other concern was the limited perspective that a first-person POV demands, in that all descriptions of surroundings and reflections on the society had to be through her eyes as the main focalising character. I found this aspect of the novel quite limiting, as I wanted the freedom to represent alternative perspectives. On the other side of the "voice" argument, I was concerned about the shift to third person removing a subjective voice or point of view. Having

the protagonist speak in first person offers an intimacy that is not as accessible from a third-person perspective, as this sense of voice can only come through when the character is engaging in dialogue.

In order to see the differences between these two sets of concerns, a line in the early phase of the novel can be taken from each draft and compared. In Peace's first chapter, Birch Kelly sounds a gong in the hallway and wakes her. When the novel was written from a first-person perspective, this process was accompanied by a personal comment about what Peace was experiencing in that moment: "at exactly 6:00am, the sound of the gong in the hall pulled me from a lovely dream I was having about a BBQ attended by me and lots of happy little animals that kept insisting that they put themselves on the grill" (Moore, 2014, p. 6). This dream hints at Peace's attitudes about her parents' vegetarian lifestyle.

In the 2016 version of the novel, this moment is expressed in third-person narration: "on the first morning of *The Cloud*, the gong rang out like it was any other day," (Richardson, 2016, p. 8). While this second line does not offer a perspective on how Peace is feeling, it depicts the action in a broader sense. The working of this second line suggests that whether Peace was there or not, this event was likely to occur. Removing Peace's perspective on actions in the story worked with postnatural notions as the third-person perspective pointed towards a system where things occur and affect other aspects of this system instead of a personal or subjective feeling or insight of an individual experiencing these events.

Some of the impetus to shift to a third-person narrative came from the developments in the underpinning theory of the exegesis and the focus texts that were analysed in this document. As I became more aware of postnatural theory, I was concerned about representing the

protagonist as saviour (Bradford et. al., 2008, p. 96). In moving away from Peace being the sole instigator of change in her society, I found myself becoming less convinced about what a first-person perspective had to offer. My main concern was that representing Peace as taking umbrage with the effects of human-induced climate change would serve as nothing more than the “consciousness-raising effect” that Bradford et al. discuss in their section on small-scale community and practical action (Bradford et. al., 2008, p. 96). Furthermore, in this early draft the Cloud was not being caused by the lifestyles of people that were currently living in the world, but rather by those who had lived before her. Not only would Peace be unable to battle against polluters of her own time, but there was the added layer of impossibility when the pollution had been created by societies that existed long before the Flagship. The work of Bradford et al. and the focus novels showed me the importance of not representing Peace as the sole saviour of her world, and this research informed my decision to move away from the first-person POV. While it would have been possible to portray Peace from a first-person perspective, the potential for her to be represented as the saviour or to show all events and character developments from her singular perspective made a third-person perspective the right choice for a postnatural novel.

My reading of the focus novels from a postnatural perspective provided more evidence for this shift, as I found a difference in my experience reading *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* compared with the other two novels. Ashala’s story is told in first person from a limited perspective as she has lost her memories. A first-person perspective works well with Ashala’s intentional memory loss, as there is a significant change in her treatment of other characters and her perspective of the world when she gains access to her full self again. However, the technique of first-person narration also coloured the story world as it was focalised from Ashala’s perspective, which complicates or limits a postnatural reading. It was difficult to perceive the

world outside of what it meant to Ashala, as she spent little time empathising with other characters and their perspectives on life. At a critical moment in the text, when Ashala holds the river-stones that will counter the ceremony that Ember has performed, she makes the comment that “four sets of memories came blazing through my brain, transforming everything I thought I knew about the world” (Kwaymullina, 2012, p. 175). It is after this experience that she is capable of undertaking the resistance against Neville Rose, Miriam Grey, and Detention Centre 3. However, the depiction of these events from Ashala’s perspective means that the reader most strongly perceives a sense of Ashala’s contributions to these events, and the ways in which other detainees and the saurs are involved meld into the background. As Peace’s character growth is based around her exposure to different ways of understanding and living in the world, I did not want to represent her story as that of a first-person narrator. When I made the shift to a third-person style of narration, this opened up enormous opportunities for the novel, including the ability to have scenes where Peace is not present. These scenes, narrated by Will and Star, provide context for the experiences that Peace is having and assisted with my capacity to world-build in the creation of the novel.

Multiple Narrators

Shifting into third-person narration opened up the ability to stage the scenes where Star is tortured and drugged by Will, as well as how Will is stoking the rebellion that combats Flagship powers at the end of the text. While I was still deciding on perspectives, I had the idea of Star being kidnapped and the aggressor using Star’s phone to draw Peace out of the Flagship. As this would not have been possible from a first-person perspective, I initially wrote these scenes as a world-building exercise in order to understand the dynamics of the situation before it became an

event in the story world that Peace was responding to. The more that I wrote on the situation between Star and Will, the more I felt these characters had pivotal roles to play in the story. Punctuating Peace's chapters with perspectives from both Star and Will provided a more rounded understanding of the dynamics of the world, its history, and how the ideologies within the world are interconnected and co-exist. The more that I engaged in postnatural theory, the more sense it made to represent this world from more than one position.

When the novel was narrated from a single perspective, there were moments that alluded to information about the world that Peace did not understand. While this was still an opportunity for the reader to perceive Peace as developing in her awareness, her questioning of the world did not provide information about the world-building that contributed to a comprehensive view of how all things are interconnected. The most obvious example of this is in the representation of the Cloud in the 2014 version, where the reader only has access to Peace's understanding of this phenomenon, which hindered my own world-building about where the Cloud originated and why. When there was a capacity for the Clouds to be represented from several perspectives, I had the idea of Peace having a monologic understanding of the Clouds handed down to her through the education and ideologies of the dystopian society. This in turn changed the entire way that I perceived the Flagship operating. While in the 2014 draft of the novel the Cloud really was a result of southern fires and global warming, the 2016 draft represents this notion as the dystopian explanation to the people of the Flagship. In the 2016 version, the Clouds have become a by-product of the highly consumerist society of the Flagship. Upper Management, the dystopian authorities in the Flagship, maintain the lie of the Clouds coming from the south as Flagships are presented to the public as functioning on recycling and clean energies. If citizens of the Flagships were aware of the negative effects of their consumerist lifestyles, they would stop purchasing so

many products. However, if people stop purchasing products, the Projects would receive limited funding and therefore not be able to explore as many avenues for protecting the Flagship against current and future effects of climate change.

In an early scene focalised from Will's POV, the reader is introduced to the concept that Peace has been misled about the origins of the Clouds. By alerting the reader to these aspects of the world before Peace uncovers them, the story allows the reader to understand co-existence in the world of the text and to anticipate other aspects of the world that dystopian ideologies may have concealed. In Will's early scene where he visits the factory ring and delivers bribes to the foremen, the first worker proclaims: 'You got three days to make it work, hear? After that, we're shutting her down. We're the first one in the line of fire here. I hope you've considered that' (Richardson, 2016, p. 72). This conversation foreshadows the events that occur later in the novel, and is an early representation of the interactions between the Flagship and those living in the Surrounds. Choosing to develop the novel with three narrators enabled me to represent the world of the text from a dialogic perspective.

Bakhtin's (1981) notion of living discourse provided the theoretical framework for understanding how novels can shape readers' perceptions of terms, as well as how the natural evolution of terms through interactions with different people can be portrayed in a novel. Just as Bakhtin discusses how daily conversations contribute to the individual's perception of a term, the conversations that a character has in a novel have the opportunity to represent this same accumulation of meanings. In the beginning of the novel, Peace is prone to frustration when somebody uses a term in a way that she perceives as misinformed or incorrect. An example of this in the first chapter is the way that her parents use "human," referring to those living outside of the Flagship as being closer to human than people living within it (Richardson, 2016, p. 22).

As Peace interacts with people who have varied perspectives on the world, she becomes more tolerant of diverse opinions and usage of language. At the end of the novel, Peace is willing to embrace the complete destruction of Flagship dominance over language and create her own perspective based on the amalgamation of meanings and terms she has been and will be exposed to by those who live outside of the Flagship. Peace places importance on language through her connection with Blue's illiterate children at the end of the novel, responding to their assertion that they have read her picture books with the comment: "come and sit. I'll read you the words" (Richardson, 2016, p. 202). By encouraging the next generation to be able to use language to decode stories and engage with others, Peace is actively fostering the same process of living discourse that shaped her understanding of the world.

The Cloud as Product and Protest

The idea of the Cloud underwent three key changes between the 2014 and 2016 drafts. The first change was to make the Clouds a regular occurrence. I made this decision because I wanted to have the Clouds a symptom of a larger problem. By making the Clouds occur regularly, I created a tension in the world that called for social change. Furthermore, the Clouds became a direct result of the consumerism in the Flagship. Early Clouds in the nation's history were still a result of the fires down south, but latter ones were caused by factory disruptions. Incorporating the Clouds as a symbol of the Flagship's true interaction with the world also engaged with Timothy Morton's notion of hyperobjects, which was discussed in the introduction to this document. Under normal circumstances, the pollution from the Flagship factories would be stored underground. However, Will periodically makes deals with the factories, providing resources and Flagship money in exchange for factory "malfunctions" which release the pollution that would

usually be stored underground as a Cloud. On the Cloud that this novel depicts, Will has organized for all of the factory ring to be releasing pollution steadily over several days, resulting in the longest Cloud recorded in Flagship history. Will designs the Clouds as a calling card for the times when he kidnaps members of Upper Management from the Flagship. He performs organic-based tortures that he deems fitting punishment for the actions and careers of his victims. For Will, the Clouds are a protest that makes visible the filth and corruption of the society.

In both versions of the novel, the Cloud is something that unites different groups and inspires people to enact social change. The 2016 version expresses this sentiment early on, as Wattle is certain that more people will join their protest, assuring Peace that Birch “says that this Cloud is a blessing of sorts. That something this foul unites people, no matter how different they are” (Richardson, 2016, p. 21). Birch and Wattle are entirely unaware of the rebellion that is being planned on the outside of the Flagship, and so this is the first representation of a connection between those in the Flagship and those in the Surrounds. In the 2014 draft, the Cloud is something that draws people from all over the community to Birch and Wattle’s protest outside of Jenkins’ house. After Peace initially hears about her family’s plans, they begin to have a conversation about opposing views of anti-social behaviour:

‘When are you going to do it?’

‘Tomorrow morning.’

‘Tomorrow morning?’

‘Yes, tomorrow morning.’

‘And who ’ll be joining you?’

'All sorts.'

'All sorts?'

'Yes, all sorts.'

'And where will you find these sorts?'

'They'll find us,' my brother chimed in, earning one of my more sceptical expressions.

'So you're just going to stand outside Mayor Jenkin's house with some homemade signs and hope for the best?'

'Bigger things have started with less,' my mother said in the kind of ethereal tone that my brother has tried so desperately to copy.

'You're going to stand outside the house of a man who has done nothing wrong and scream and jump up and down until other people come to scream and jump with you until people with cameras come who can show your screaming and jumping up and down all over the six o'clock news?'

'But that's where you've got it wrong Peace,' my Mum said, 'because he hasn't done 'nothing' wrong. He's made a whole city full of people believe that doing nothing isn't doing something wrong. And that's about as wrong as you can get.' (Moore, 2014, pp. 13-14)

The preparation for and execution of this protest, which Peace's parents stage with the belief that other members of the Flagship will be as concerned as they are, bookends the 2014

draft of the novel. Some of these citizens are there due to conversations that they had with Peace, but many saw the Cloud as an opportunity to pressure the government into taking more serious action about the effects of climate change. At this time, the society was not yet the Flagship in my mind and did not revolve around consumerism and the Projects. This meant that the Flagship was not solely responsible for the Clouds, and that the citizen backlash resulted mainly from their concern for environmental safety. In the 2016 draft, the Flagship controls resources and shuts out anybody who is not able or willing to engage in the consumerist society. The rebellion at the conclusion of the novel symbolises the breaking down of the barrier between the Flagship and the rest of the ecosystem, enabling Flagship citizens to be exposed to other ways of living in and understanding the world. As these groups infiltrating the Flagship have intentionally unleashed the Clouds, the Clouds became a symbol of resistance. While these Clouds initially belong to Will, they come to belong to all people who are resisting the Flagship by forcing those within the Flagship to be confronted by a tangible effect of their consumerist lifestyles.

A significant influence in my development of the Clouds was Heather Sullivan's *dirt theory* and the effect that mobile pollution has on the world. Sullivan's dirt theory helped to shape the role that the Clouds play in the novel in several ways. Sullivan notes that because pollution is so mobile, it has the ability to travel through space and time to affect the ecosystem much more broadly than just the direct area where it is released into the ecosystem (Sullivan, 2012, p. 516). The Flagship might be storing the smog underground, but this short-sighted and hazardous behaviour demonstrates the extent to which the rest of the ecosystem does not affect the decisions of the Flagship. By releasing the pollution into the air around the immediate vicinity of the Flagship, the rebellious groups in the anarchy sparked by Will are pushing for citizens of the Flagship to understand how their lifestyles are truly affecting the world, as well as

to begin fighting against this pollution being dumped in another space or time and becoming somebody else's issue. The citizens of the Flagship are not aware that their lifestyle creates such pollution, and with the Flagship still functional it is impossible to communicate with these people unless they are the officials or scientists who are allowed out into the Surrounds in order to research for their Projects.

Morton's notion of hyperobjects also influenced my decision to make the Clouds a regular occurrence, as this enabled a new space for discussing postnatural concepts. Morton defines hyperobjects as those so large that it is difficult for people to comprehend them, let alone come up with an action to agree on and do anything about them. When he addresses climate change deniers and similar rejections of the idea that the Earth's systems are failing due to human behaviours, Morton suggests that humans lack the ability to truly perceive these massive and often invisible foes. Furthermore, as many people do not have the training or means to access and interpret scientific data or run tests themselves, they are essentially required to believe these notions on good faith in scientific practice. While I myself don't doubt the findings of climatologists, I became interested in structuring a fictional society around this notion of trust in science and what would happen when this trust was abused. In many ways, this abuse of trust would become a hyperobject of its own, with politics and social norms constructing an enormous and invisible foe. In this novel, not only does Peace struggle to be able to comprehend that her lifestyle and the lifestyles of all those in the Flagship cause the pollution of the Clouds, whether they are in the sky or trapped under the ground, but she similarly finds it difficult to be able to understand the level to which the Flagship has deceived her and her fellow citizens. Through a systematic education that purposely misrepresents their world, Flagship citizens are actively led to believe that their lifestyle is green and sustainable. The unveiling of this lie to Peace is the

section of the counternarrative where the corruption of the dystopian society is revealed to the protagonist, and I viewed her ability to understand this level of corruption as similar to humanity's lack of an ability to process hyperobjects. The decision to have the Clouds operating as a protest against Flagship ideals provided scaffolding for my plot, development for all of my characters, and a symbol of postnaturalism that showed how both environmental and ideological aspects of the ecosystem all overlap in their interconnected sphere.

In embracing the pollution as an aspect of the world, these groups outside of the Flagship accept, as Sullivan does, that once something becomes part of the world it has agency, whether it is a leaf or a piece of plastic (Sullivan, 2012, p. 515). Similarly to Ashala's revelation in *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, it is not the technology or the pollution that is at fault. These parts of the ecosystem have been produced and released and are now a part of this world. However, humans control these parts of the ecosystem. In making these changes in the representation of the Clouds, I shifted the focus to the ways in which parts of the ecosystem are interconnected. Instead of having the public protesting against a lack of policy to deal with the Clouds, there is the complex set of issues that must be considered about the ways in which parts of the ecosystem must co-exist. Part of this co-existence involves people with conflicting ideologies, of which the second draft has a keener sense, due to the introduction of an antagonist, Will.

Multiple Antagonists

The 2014 draft depicted Jenkins as the only antagonist in the novel, and I grew concerned about this representation depicting a particular set of ideologies as superior to others. In order to represent a variety of ideologies without pointing to one as superior to another, I instead represented several characters as antagonists. In the 2016 draft of the novel, there are three

antagonists: Will, who is the key antagonist; Mr. Jenkins; and Star (whose obsession with his Projects comes to obscure his judgement). Whereas Peace only confronts Jenkins in the 2014 version, in the 2016 version, she must come to terms with the perspectives of a wide variety of people. While Peace is discovering where she sits ideologically in the spectrum that she is exposed to throughout the novel, she particularly has to confront Jenkins, Star, and Will. Each of these three aggressors dies at the end of the novel when their extreme perspectives put them in compromising situations. Instead of privileging one of these perspectives over others, Peace takes from each of these three points of view, as well as those of many others that she encounters in her journey in the Surrounds. As Peace considers how all the ideologies that she has been exposed to are interconnected, she finds a perspective that takes parts of many of these ideologies and doesn't put her in direct confrontation with individuals and groups.

The 2014 draft represents Peace's development towards a postnatural perspective to a degree, but it does not engage with as many ideologies as the 2016 version. In the earlier draft, Peace's parents were represented as left-wing, Jenkins as right-wing, and the people that Peace encountered as varying degrees along this line. There was not a sufficient engagement with an ecocritical or postnatural perspective, as there was a limited representation of approaches to ecology or ecological crises. Even in the final lines of this draft, Peace has not come to terms with where she sits ideologically, and instead abuses Jenkins' trust and transmits what he is saying to the protest that is being led by her parents outside of his house: "my fingers wrapped around the walkie talkie. It still had a little battery. It would be enough" (Moore, 2014, p.119). Ending on this line implies Peace's actions, leaving the effects of this event up to the imagination of the reader. Peace is more influenced by antagonists in the 2016 version, which is particularly

obvious in the scene where Will takes Peace up to the lookout to show her how the Clouds come out of the Flagship factories:

The Flagship stood off in the distance, glittering through the Cloud. It was so much larger than Peace had ever realised. She could see Boundary. And Newtown too. The Flagship sat bold like a spider in its web, with the satellites as tolerated mates. Surrounding the cities was a ring of factories, each of them streaming thick, black smog up to meet the dark, putrid sky. (Moore, 2016, p.156)

Through her conversations with people in the Surrounds, Peace has been exposed to a variety of perspectives on the ways in which the Flagship is more damaging than Peace has been raised to believe. This moment at the lookout provides the first undeniable and tangible evidence that Director Jenkins and Upper Management have misrepresented Flagship lifestyle as sustainable and green. Through being exposed to physical engagements with the world as opposed to purely philosophical ones, Peace is confronted with direct evidence of how the parts of the ecosystem are interconnected. Representing landscapes as well as plant and non-human animal life intensifies Peace's relationships with the antagonists and their views as they provided something tangible to represent these ideas.

In the same way that Applebaum recommends an equal representation of societies (mechanism, naturalism and equilibrium), I wrote the novel with the intention of representing a spectrum of ideologies as co-existing, instead of simply juxtaposing them. As the 2014 draft did not have a complex engagement with perspectives on ecology and ecological crises, I made a

conscious decision in the drafting process to base each of the antagonists' motivations around extreme perspectives on ecology.

Director Jenkins is initially represented as being grounded in a scientific perspective, dedicating his life to the Projects and “investing” in the future. Star is developing under Jenkins' watch, dedicated to the ideals of the Flagship, but more narrowly invested in his own Project on long-range dispersers. Both of these perspectives come into conflict with Will, who was raised in one of the early Projects, Terraria, a prototype bubble that was built as a potential solution to the Clouds, which came from the fires in the south at the time. When the prototype ended up not being economical, it was cut off from Flagship resources and Will was the only one who survived. Will's hatred of the Flagship extends to his opposition towards the Projects that the Flagship commissions, because he believes that plants and animals should not be modified to survive in the new environment.

As my novel represents the ways in which ideologies are interconnected in an ecosystem, the counternarrative depicts conflicts between these perspectives. By having characters with directly conflicting motivations drive this counternarrative, I was influenced by a similar approach used in *The Big Dry*. In *The Big Dry*, George's fierce desire to protect Beeper from any outside influences is contrasted with Emily's motivation to belong somewhere. The conflicts that arise between these characters mark the key points which drive the narrative forward: George becoming increasingly concerned that Emily will call Welfare, and Emily facing the prospect of further loneliness. Through my incorporation of conflicting motivations and ideologies for the antagonists of *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys*, the novel came to have more drive and provided a spectrum of dramatically different positions of engagement for Peace.

Transforming Star

One of the most significant changes between the two documents was the decision to shift Star's ideological stance to create him as a role model for Peace. In the earlier draft, Star was aligned with his parents' perspectives on the Flagship and the world. Wattle and Birch have an outlook on the world closer to an ecocentric or biocentric perspective, and focus their dissatisfaction through a hatred of Jenkins. Both 2014 and 2016 drafts depict the younger Star as being in a similar position to Peace in that both feel restricted and frustrated by their parents' lifestyles and discussions. In the 2014 version, Star had started a philosophy course at university and moved closer to his parents' opinions as a result of his disapproval of the government. Having Star in this position did nothing to further this early scene as Peace's character was already clearly established through her sense of not fitting in with her parents. In order to strengthen Peace's connection to Flagship ideologies, I wanted her to have a deep respect for an additional character aside from Director Jenkins. Transforming Star opened up narrative possibilities for the story, as it helped to fuel Peace's fanaticism for the Projects and a blind trust that led to adventure.

Star played a fairly minor role in the early draft and was only present in the first and final scenes, like Peace's parents. After I transformed Star into someone who Peace had always adored, and who had left for university to work towards his own Project, he began to be more central to the plot. It was soon after developing Star as a faithful member of the Flagship that I considered the possibility of him having his own chapters and being kidnapped. Soon after, Will came to life and began to command a space of his own in the narrative as well. Once Peace and Star meet towards the end of their novel, their chapters are also melded. I used this technique to represent Peace's pull back towards Star's perspective. After being exposed to new ways of

living in and understanding the world, the presence of Star still makes Peace feel the desire to return to the Flagship and attempt to change Jenkins. Even as she begins to see Star as single-minded, Peace's respect and love for him cause her to follow him almost to her death. Will witnesses Star burst into his aviary of flying foxes after Will has released nerve gas, demonstrating the ultimate clouding of judgement through his passion for the Project: Star launches into the room with little thought for what was around him.

Star dropped Will, ran to the aviary door, and slammed his palm against the scanner, and the door slid open. Will's mask was hanging down at his side. Star fell to the floor, bleeding from eyes, nose, and ears. As Will grabbed his mask, he heard more footsteps. (Richardson, 2016, p. 187)

When Peace rushes into the room, Will saves her by taking off his own gas mask and forcing it onto her. As the two antagonists die, and with Jenkins already being digested in the stomach of a crocodile, Peace is left sheltering in the last remaining seed bank from Star's Project. With all three of these extremist antagonists dead and the Flagship being restructured by the rebellion, Peace reflects on the ways in which these approaches to ecology and ecological crises were not able to co-exist, but how aspects of these perspectives might contribute towards her own ecological position towards the world.

The focus novels represent the value of the protagonist engaging with other young people whose ideologies are similar to their own, or who can offer insight into perspectives for the protagonist to consider. *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* depicts Ashala as an integral part of the Tribe. While members of this Tribe have a degree of ideological diversity, they are bonded through their identity as Illegals and the treatment

they would receive within city walls. The Tribe is represented as looking up to Ashala, but she learns more about the world from all members of the Tribe, not just her fellow leaders. Ember and Georgie ground Ashala's aggressive leadership with perspectives on society and spirituality, but Ashala is most significantly influenced by one of the children that have joined the Tribe, Jaz, due to his resilience and optimism. Ashala's time with Jaz heals much of her emotional turbulence about her sister's death and allows her greater clarity in her leadership.

Days Like This follows Lily's transformation through her interactions with the young people outside of the wall after her brother Daniel is taken away. While Daniel stands as a role model for Lily at the beginning of the novel, her next interaction with him is when he is weakened nearly to the point of death from harvesting. Lily takes what she has learned from her brother and others, and becomes a character who engages equally with her brother as their new relationship is fostered.

The Big Dry represents a different relationship between the characters from the other novels, as George is older than his sibling Beeper, with whom he connects ideologically, and George takes it upon himself to be like a parent to Beeper. As Beeper is half his age, George initially rejects a lot of the contributions that Beeper makes to discussions and blames him when he reveals information about their situation to anybody else. Beeper's trust in Emily is an instinct that makes the boys survive in the end, and they expand this circle of trust to Mr. Carey. In each of the three focus texts, a relationship with a sibling or sibling substitute pushes the protagonist to develop their own subjectivity and intersubjective relations with others. Transforming Star from being aligned with the ideologies of his parents to being a loyal member of the Flagship gives

the novel a natural sense of drive as Peace attempts to follow Star not only ideologically, but physically outside of the Flagship.

Venturing Outside

Another key difference between the 2014 and the 2016 drafts was the decision to turn Peace's city into the Flagship, a locked off society, and have everything outside of the Flagship termed the Surrounds. This distinction was a purposeful attempt to create the boundaries that a postnatural perspective aims to eliminate, as I wanted Peace to start from a position of perceiving differences between the Flagship and the rest of the ecosystem. In the Surrounds are various satellite cities where like-minded people gather in an attempt to create ways of living differently from those within the Flagship. In the 2014 draft, Peace's city was not blocked off from her surroundings and therefore there was no sense of going 'outside' of it. Once I created this barrier between the Flagship and the Surrounds, I could then make Peace's crossing of this boundary her first act of resistance against the ideals of the Flagship. In crossing this physical boundary, Peace opens up the potential to gain a direct education in the perspectives, landscapes, and all else that lie beyond the Flagship. While Peace's education has given her a sweeping knowledge of the parts of her world, actually experiencing these places gives her a different perspective and forms the steps towards her challenging the ideologies that she once accepted without question.

The 2014 draft only engaged with notions of ecology and ecological crises to the degree that they affected Peace's own city. Building the novel from a postnatural perspective required me to expose Peace to the world outside of her city, as her initial engagement with the world was only through a set of conversations with members of her city against the backdrop of the Cloud. Having Peace explore the world outside of the Flagship means she is forced to question the

information and opinions that were core to her sense of identity. The first instance of this is when Peace steps out into the Surrounds and finds herself in one of the Flagship's pine plantations. The first discrepancy between Peace's perception of the way that the Flagship affects the world and the tangible reality is the vastness of these pine plantations: "the first thing that hit her was the greenery. She knew that it was only the plantations, but in class the plantations had always been described as something very fragile. As far as she could see, the road was lined with trees on either side." (Richardson, 2016, p.57).

Peace feels uncomfortable about these plantations, but struggles to express a rational perspective on this as she has been raised to believe that their Flagship lifestyle is based on clean and sustainable energies and practices. The closest that Peace comes to understanding how she feels about the plantations is when she tells her Buddybot Echo that "I thought that being out in nature would be a little different. But with all of these trees in rows like this, it just kind of feels like home" (Richardson, 2016, p. 84). Peace's statement is not a direct attempt to revise her Flagship ideals, but the physical representation of a landscape in front of her makes it impossible for her to ignore as she prides herself on her rational and scientific outlook on the world. Peace's respect for science creates an even greater conflict in her mind when she encounters one of Star's old university friends in Newtown. Phil is still working with the Flagship, but chooses to work outside as he feels that you "can't go making decisions about the world when you've only seen a very small part of it" (Richardson, 2016, p.109). Phil discusses the plantations with Peace, commenting on how the monoculture of the plantations is destructive to the ecosystem:

The trees weren't quite so ordered here, but a lot of them were still quite small. She didn't figure it for reforestation due to the randomness. Everywhere there was devil's twine and

other plants like it searching out anything that didn't belong, and strangling anything that they weren't sure of.

When Phil popped his head out of the door Peace was lost in thought again.

'It gets worse the further you go out. Except for a couple of protected regions.'

'What stops them from growing?'

'A number of things. A lot of the problem is the swinging between the drought and the storms. The Flagship get so particular about only modding native species, but there isn't anywhere for them to be native to anymore. Things have changed too fast and the plants haven't had a chance to catch up yet. Planting native stuff that hasn't been modded now is the same as planting an exotic tree. And the soil doesn't help either.'

'Why's that?'

'Again, a few reasons. There usually are. The biggest one is how often people used to plant the same type of thing in the same area over and over.'

'You mean like they are still doing with the plantations.'

'One battle at a time huh?'

'What do you mean? If they know that, why would they keep doing it?'

Phil grimaced.

'One of the many frustrations that you've got waiting for you in a couple of years.'

(Richardson, 2016, p. 103-104)

Between being physically exposed to settings that contradict Peace's understanding of the world and conversations that discuss these issues and allow her to come to revised perspectives, Peace develops her own understanding of the world away from the monologic influence of the Flagship.

The decision to have Peace venture into the Surrounds was also motivated by the work in this thesis on anthropocentrism. I did not try to resist the representation of human relationships, as this is crucial to the genre and the development of a young adult protagonist as they attempt to find their place in their society and the world. However, by only engaging with ecology and ecological crises through human conversations and perspectives, as in the 2014 draft, the novel could only construct Peace's understanding of the world through other characters' perceptions of the ecosystem. There was also the issue that Peace was interacting with other people in very similar social situations to herself, even though some of these were minority groups. Peace may have spoken to the elderly, homeless, and mentally disabled, but all of these people lived in the city and had the same understanding as Peace of the ecological crisis of the Cloud. Exposure to physical landscapes and resources of the Flagship allows Peace to reassess her understanding of the world without needing the perspectives of others.

Finally, moving out into the Surrounds also gave me the opportunity to explore the development of the character Echo. Echo is a Buddybot, a government issued robot that tracks the purchases that a young person makes and help them to rate these products. As the Flagship is built on the purchases of its citizens, Buddybots help to put young people into what the Flagship would consider to be good practices. Buddybots are not only able to think and communicate, but grow with the individual to maintain a keen sense of purchases that might interest them. In this way, the consumerist lifestyle is given a personal interface that the young person bonds with, making their purchases a way that they define themselves. As postnaturalism was influenced by

posthuman thought, I wanted to include Echo and his progression towards somewhat of an existential crisis the longer that they are away from the Flagship. When he goes offline, Echo feels shut off from his purpose and connection with the Flagship and begins thinking about himself and his interactions with humans, as well as what makes a human. Just in the way that Carey Wolf explores the notion of the posthuman being after humanist thoughts with a decentring of the human perspective, I wanted to explore a non-human character who could communicate to the same level that a human could. Echo can not only think and feel, but he can also judge situations and courses of action. There are several interactions between Echo and Peace in the novel where they differ in opinion, and this causes him distress as he is designed to naturally align with Peace's thoughts and feelings. Echo's character development explores what it is to be human and the divides that we might begin to experience as a species in the future. He develops through being offline and away from the Flagship, being exposed to so many new concepts in the Surrounds, and through his attempts to interact with Star's deactivated Buddybot, Sunseeker. Just as with postnaturalism and the removal of the spheres of built and Natural environments, the definition of the "human" is likely to become increasingly blurred the more that we develop artificial intelligence. As both postnaturalism and posthumanism explore the notion of the decentring of the importance of the human, I feel that Echo's development was a crucial aspect of the novel that progressed along with Peace's perspectives on ecology and ecological crises.

Establishing Setting

The final change between the two drafts was the localizing of the narrative to the area where I grew up. In the 2014 draft of the novel, I wanted to depict Peace's city as able to be almost anywhere in Australia. However, as I continued to engage more deeply with ecocritical theory, I

felt the need to include some more specific details about the plant and animal life in the area. The process of locating the setting of the novel in a specific area significantly developed the plot, coinciding with the time that I decided to represent Peace's city as one of the Flagships. In the 2016 draft of the novel, Peace lives in the sub-region of SEQ03 and ventures to SEQ10, where she believes that Star is intending to meet her. These subregions, and the others that are referenced in the novel, are the biogeographic regions for South-East Queensland. I created Peace's world by using mapping tools to find out information about these regions and climate change predictions for Australia to project how the effects of global warming might affect the nation.

Background research on climate change predictions for Australia provided key world-building details for my writing process. I decided to limit these references to a few comments so that this research didn't become overbearing and stop the flow of the story. Both the Projects and the observations that Peace makes about the Surrounds are decisions made as a result of this research, and these details affect the way in which the plot develops and progresses. For example, when I was thinking about how Will would torture his victims, I felt that he should be resourceful with the plants and animals around him, using these parts of the ecosystem to take revenge on the figures who have caused so much imbalance in it. This is obvious from the first scene, where Will uses oleander in order to kidnap Star. Oleander, which is also known as the Captain Cook Tree, is a highly invasive plant species in Queensland. This shrub and its flowers have toxic smoke when burned. Will also makes use of a variety of local plants and a cane toad to create a tea that causes paralysis and hallucinations for Star, stationing him at the window where Star must observe the Cloud pervading one of the last protected rainforests in the Gondwana Rainforest region between the border of Queensland and New South Wales. Other

aspects that I based on research include the health of the rainforest, which has grown due to increased carbon emissions, the migration of crocodiles to South-East Queensland due to turbulent conditions in the northern regions of the state, and the methods behind Will's acts of rebellion against Flagship resources, focussing on plants and animals that will do well with a warmed climate.

Aside from the Cloud, Will also attempts to destabilize Flagship resources. One of the ways this is represented is through his regular dispersal of pine beetles into the plantation. Pine beetles are extremely destructive in the ecosystem as it currently is, but their populations are set to thrive with the predicted effects of climate change in Australia. Will breeds insects and creatures in a pet shop inside of the dome where he lives and releases them into the world in the hope that they will be able to negatively affect the infrastructure of the Flagship and bring the ecosystem to a greater sense of balance. Will expresses his opinion on modifying plants and animals to cope with the altered ecosystem to Peace as they are looking out at the view of the Flagship, its ring of factories, and the satellite cities:

There's no point in focussing on the things that are gone. Focus on the ones that are still here. Those people in the cities, they cook up cocktails from the past because it's what they know. That's what they think of as nature. What it "should" be. They want to bring back the dead into dying into a world that isn't meant for them. What they need to do is let the dust settle. See what comes out of this mess. (Richardson, 2016, p.163)

Through interacting with Will, Director Jenkins, Star, Phil, Birch and Wattle, and multiple people outside of the Flagship, Peace begins to understand how these different

perspectives affect each other. Without the key world-building details that came from background research, I feel that these characters would not have such fully-fledged motivations around and perspectives on ecology and ecological crises.

The need to focus on specific details is also something that I understood through engaging with William McKibben's text *The End of Nature*, even though I consider that McKibben has a tendency to sensationalise certain details with the intention of provoking the reader into action or to undergo a change of perspective. While I don't think this is an ecologically responsible position, I do see the value in the use of practical examples that McKibben incorporated throughout the text. In providing details about the ways in which the world around him had changed, McKibben put forward visual details that would remain with the reader. Discussing the philosophical idea of Nature and the human relationship with this construct was crucial in order to ask the reader to critically assess their own perception of these concepts, but without real-world representations of these ideas there is the danger of these concepts not making a full impression on the reader, or not staying with them beyond reading the text. McKibben's personal stories about how the landscape around his property is changing, as well as his references to scientific studies, such as the effects of DDT, provide concrete ideas that the reader can grasp and relate to the philosophical notions that he is discussing. I felt the need to employ this same method in my own world, interspersing the story with concrete details that reveal the effect that human-induced climate change has had on the fictional world in *When the Cloud Hit the Kellys*.

Progression of Terms

Throughout the counternarrative of the novel, there are many terms that I attempted to represent as shifting from a monologic to a dialogic context as Peace got physically and ideologically further from the Flagship. As I only focussed on three terms for the novels that I discussed in Chapter Three, I will similarly narrow this discussion to three terms: Flagship, Projects, and the Surrounds. For each of these terms, Peace began with a solid definition from her Flagship education and time in the city, which slowly shifted the more that she explored spaces and cities outside of the Flagship. This shift to having more context for these terms and their underlying ideas is not represented as a journey that only Peace engages with, but also one that Star, Phil, and many other characters must follow as they mature and learn more about their society. Furthermore, the final passage where Peace offers to read stories to Blue's children is the start of two more people in her world gaining access to not only words, but their multiple and shifting meanings. By ending with Peace introducing written language to these illiterate children, the novel shows how she is opening up their ability to understand and interpret language.

In the beginning of the text, Peace's connection with the term Flagship is a sense of pride, security, and ecological responsibility. While Birch and Wattle express discontent with the Flagship early on in the piece, they are the only two figures that Peace sees actively expressing opinions against Flagship ideals. Peace not only gets frustrated that Birch and Wattle do not believe in the goals of the Flagship, but is of the opinion that their views are therefore illogical. Peace continues to hold these opinions and express disdain for people who do not understand the true ideals of the Flagship until Will shows her hard evidence that Flagship lifestyles are not

sustainable and ecologically friendly, and that the Projects do not necessarily mean a more secure future for the entire ecosystem, only for the Flagship itself.

Peace's relationship with the term Projects goes through a similar shift through her contact with both Star and Phil on the outside. This shift does not cause her to reject the ideals, as she does with the Flagship, but rather to take a more balanced approach than either Star or Will. Even though Will is not affiliated with the Flagship or Projects aside from being a product of a failed experiment, his breeding of animals and experimentation with plants function as a parallel with the work of Star and his colleagues in Flagship Tech. Through her discussions with Phil, Peace comes to understand that all of the Flagship's Projects have the primary goal of making the Flagship sustainable, whereas her education has led her to believe that the Projects aimed to stabilize the ecosystem selflessly. At the end of the novel when the Flagship is largely dissolved, Peace still clings to the Projects with hope. While the direction of the Projects under the Flagship might have been too narrow, the continuation of these Projects under people from different backgrounds might have a chance at the original goal of the Projects, to stabilize not only the Flagship, but the built and non-built environments in the Surrounds as well.

Finally, the term Surrounds is something that has dropped out of Peace's vocabulary by the end of the novel. Whereas Surrounds was an important term in her Flagship Education, before Peace leaves the Flagship Mr. Fredricks begins to warn her about the use of that term and about calling each of the establishments cities. As Peace begins to venture out of the Flagship, she comes to understand that people who live outside of the city don't view the world in terms of the Flagship and everything that is around it. The more that Peace engages with people on the outside, the more she appreciates each city and the parts of the world that have not been labelled. At the conclusion of the novel, when the Flagship is infiltrated by those struggling to live outside,

the notion of the Surrounds is broken as there is no governing body left to determine what is where. With people from Boundary, Newtown, The Ranges, and other areas flooding into the Flagship, the term Surrounds becomes useless. Instead, the focus is turned on the ways that the population can be sustained. The future of this area is left uncertain, but the deaths of Jenkins, Star, and Will symbolically show that the time of extremism and defined areas is over, making room for a more postnatural future.

Conclusion

The seven changes between the 2014 and 2016 drafts discussed in this section represent some of the key decisions that I made as my creative and exegetical work developed. While my initial draft provided some of the core themes and developments that I wanted to address in the creative component, the drafting process was where the novel started to become something that truly reflected my engagement with the theories around young adult dystopian fiction, ecocriticism, and postnaturalism, as well as the focus texts that I examined. By attending to how a text can create a living discourse, I became more aware of the potential for dialogical encounters that were not simply anthropocentric but involved other non-human entities.

While the 2014 draft had something close to a counternarrative due to my exposure to a multitude of dystopian texts and films before my doctoral studies, my subsequent research into how the counternarrative functions in dystopian texts helped me to see the potential of this technique for my own novel. If I had not engaged with ecocritical or postnatural theory, I would have run the danger of creating a text that represented Nature in a way that presented some or all of the issues that were discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Through a conscious and critical engagement with young adult literature, I feel that I have created a young adult protagonist

whose journey has the potential to provoke critical thought in a reader instead of forcing didactic ideals.

My exposure to the theories and concepts emerging from ecocriticism and specifically postnaturalism provided me with a lens to see my own world differently and to translate ideas of postnaturalism into my novel from the first phase of raw creation, and particularly throughout the drafting process. As I became more aware of the struggles that I was experiencing in my writing, I became a more critical reader of the focus texts and considered the ways that these authors might have been confronted with similar issues in the creation of their novels. Bringing an ecocritical/postnatural perspective to young adult fiction is a complex and evolving process as it requires readers and writers to reconsider their own ecology and how they perceive and interact with it. In an age of ecological awareness and collapse, the relationship between ecocriticism and young adult literature will continue to offer new avenues for engaging with revised understandings, perspectives, and projections about our world.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Through engaging with theories of postnaturalism, the conventions of young adult dystopian literature and the development of my own creative work, I feel that I have changed the way that I will approach reading and writing for the rest of my life. Just as Timothy Morton suggested, once a person starts down the path of ecological thought it is very difficult to stop. Now when I hear the term Nature in conversation, on the news, or in other media, the word sounds uncomfortable to me. Just as many terms for categorising people have become offensive and discriminatory, the use of the term Nature is now a flag for me. Having begun to examine the ways in which all things are part of one interconnected and co-existing ecosystem, I feel that it is now impossible for me to go back to thinking about the world in terms of built and Natural environments, as well as any of the other binary opposites that put up barriers between the ways that parts of this world interact and co-exist. While this thesis focussed on young adult dystopian fiction, it would be possible to engage in this postnatural reading of texts from other genres, regardless of whether issues of ecology and ecological crises form the thematic content. My research has demonstrated the way in which a postnatural perspective can be applied to an analysis of literature, and in the construction of a work of fiction. However, my research also makes the argument that there needs also to be a shift in thinking outside of the bounds of literature and writing. Making the transition to more ecological thought should not only affect the way that somebody reads a text, but also on the ways that they digest the ecological crises of the real world and the representation of these ecological crises in the media. Along with other work in the developing field of

postnaturalism, my own work argues for more exact thinking and expression. As Strunk and White stated, discussing ‘Nature’ in a piece of writing is extremely broad. I argue for the mention of specific types of plants, animals, weather patterns, landscapes, and pollution, and to factor the ways that all of these parts of the ecosystem affect each other instead of categorising them into Natural and built environments.

Engagement with the primary and secondary literature has also changed my writing process. Developing the creative and exegetical material together has shown me the value of accessing other literature while creating a fictional world and drafting a piece. Previously, I feel that I was still subscribing to the idea of an author as somebody who generates their story worlds and plots alone, or at most through creative discussion. Engaging with other research in order to create my own novel still seemed to carry for me a sort of stigma about this process being somehow less creative, and leaning too heavily on the hard work of other authors. Watching my novel become so much richer and more comprehensive as I engaged with the theoretical and focus texts highlighted the flaws in my own process, as I was attempting to create something in isolation, away from the conversation that is happening in a field. Once I became part of that conversation, using these materials to develop my own novel felt much less like I was impinging on the ideas or creativity of others and more like I was building an awareness of an area to which I wanted to contribute. Just as an individual’s engagement with a current social issue is more effective if it refers to media developments or the perspectives of others, opening up my creation and drafting periods to the influence of theory and the focus texts gave me a more nuanced perspective on my novel. As a writer who has always experienced difficulty with plotting and drafting, I found that building a greater knowledge of how my focus genre has operated in other texts helped me to develop these aspects of my creative process. In particular, I plan to continue

to write documents that analyse the difference between my drafts, even if this process is something that I only do for personal use. Having started this thesis feeling resistant to the ways in which engaging with theory might affect my writing, I now understand the rich contexts that can be understood and connections that can be made when examining the field that has given birth to so many novels before my own contribution.

Just as I feel that my thoughts and creativity have been permanently affected by postnaturalism, I know that I have been similarly affected by the work of Bakhtin and his theories on dialogism. Since beginning to consider a methodology based in living discourse, I have found that this theory has not only affected the way that I read and write, but also the way that I engage with others in conversation. Analysing the focus literature in this thesis from a dialogic approach has opened me up to the ways in which all of the words that I use have a constantly shifting set of meanings and potential effects. Much in the way that it is difficult to stop thinking the ecological thought once it has begun, it is difficult to stop thinking about how the words we use are constantly evolving and changing with every text that we interact with. Bakhtin's work has caused me to think more about my choice of words, both inside and outside of my novel writing, and has inspired in me a desire to purposefully alter the ways in which key terms will be perceived through a text. Thinking about the lexicon in my novels has not only helped with my world-building, but also with the pacing and drive in my creative pieces.

The work that I have engaged with on postnaturalism in this thesis is far from complete. There are still many avenues for researchers and writers to explore in this new field, particularly in the cross-over between a postnatural perspective and young adult literature. The issues and techniques that I discussed in this thesis do not represent a complete list, and I look forward to observing how the meeting point between these two fields is explored in the future. There is still

so much room left for critics and writers to make their mark in shaping a postnatural approach to literature, and the ways in which this perspective can affect processes of reading and writing. Just as the most recent wave of ecocriticism is slowing down and ecocritics are thinking about what it really is to be discussing Nature, the same slow process must be applied to postnaturalism to explore all of the ways in which the ecological thought can expand to encompass all parts of our world and the worlds of texts that we produce. These projects could take almost any form, both inside and outside of the arts, and with each investment in this field the work of Morton will gain more and more tangible examples for an audience to connect with. Whereas Morton's current discussion of postnaturalism is purposefully abstract so that it can encompass all things, pairing this openness with more concrete examples will mean that even a resistant audience will be able to see how postnatural thought can be applied to our world. As the effects of climate change become more intense across the coming decades, it will be interesting to see how artistic products develop. Will we see a time when climate change becomes a background device, even in those novels that do not specifically aim to address any ecological issues? How will such a significant change to our setting alter the ways in which authors, musicians, directors, and other artists imagine the human condition? In many ways, thinking ecologically will become more essential as mobile pollution, shifting weather patterns, and other phenomena begin to change the world as we know it.

It is likely that with further work on the postnatural perspective, thinking about the representation of ecology and ecological crises in literature will become the cultural norm that Timothy Morton predicts. Through the work of critics, writers, and readers, we can move away from the social construct of Nature and become interconnected with our ecosystem again. While I originally dismissed McKibben's suggestion that those who have grown up in a postnatural

world can't possibly have a context for how the world was before human influence began to take its toll, I am beginning to think that he is right. However, instead of despairing at the idea that my relationship with Nature can never be what it was for generations past, I now want to embrace my postnatural identity. As the cracks in my world begin to show, I am ready and willing to reimagine what it is to be a human on the planet Earth.

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